

Greetings and welcome again to another edition of *Hope4HeavyHearts*. My name is Harry Metzger. I am one of the pastors of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North Hills.

Hope4HeavyHearts is a ministry dedicated to serving people by helping them to overcome the issues that weigh our hearts down and to foster the virtues that allow us to live in freedom, peace, and joy.

Our topic today is Joy, that elusive thing called joy. We all are searching for joy. And yet, our personal experience and our surveys of the lives of people we know, probably show that joy is indeed quite elusive for many. In this lecture, we will explore some of the our failed pursuits that have not lead us to joy. And, on the other hand, we will look at the things that can bring us lasting joy.

Like many of you, I suppose, as a young lad, I was intrigued by the whimsical poem by Ernest Lawrence Thayer entitled *Casey at the Bat*. The poem tells a story of a bad day of baseball for the Mudville Nine. They were trailing 4-2 going into the bottom of the ninth inning. With two outs and two men on base, the home crowd goes crazy because Mighty Casey was coming to bat. The frenzied crowd was joyous because they thought for sure that Casey would hit a home run to win the game. Down two strikes, here are the last few lines of the poem:

And now the pitcher holds the ball, and now he lets it go,

And now the air is shattered by the force of Casey's blow.

Oh, somewhere in this favoured land the sun is shining bright,

The band is playing somewhere, and somewhere hearts are light;

And somewhere men are laughing, and somewhere children shout,

But there is no joy in Mudville—mighty Casey has struck out.

I am sure that Thayer only meant his poem as a way of commemorating baseball, considered our national pastime at the time. So, it is probably unfair to analyze it in this way, but this lovely poem pictures several fallacies that we may have in our pursuit of joy. In the first place, the poem shows us that the Mudville crowd had joy that was based on circumstances. The home crowd was in a joyful frenzy as Mighty Casey came to bat, clearly expecting him to get the game-winning hit for the home team. Secondly, the joy was temporary. The joy the crowd was experiencing as Casey strode to the plate did not last long as it quickly faded when Mighty Casey struck out. Thirdly, the poem is not universal. “Somewhere” in the country there is joy; but not in Mudville.

Let us look at each of these issues in light of what the Bible has to say about joy. Then, we will try to define what joy truly is and look at how we may promote it in our daily lives. The poem does not present

joy as something that is universal. In Psalm 98:4, we are told: “Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth; Break forth and sing for joy and sing praises.” Here, joy is seen as something that is universal, that is for people of all the earth. The poem shows us that joy is temporary. Yet, the Bible makes it clear that joy is not something that is to be only temporary. The apostle Paul said in Philippians 4:4, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!” Please note the idea that we are to rejoice **always**, not only when we are experiencing pleasant things. And, finally, the Bible makes it very clear that joy is not based on our circumstances, as the fickle home crowd went from joy to sorrow almost instantly, based on their circumstances. In order to show this I would like to analyze with you briefly an amazing passage of the Bible that deals with joy.

In the Old Testament, there is this short book known as the prophecy of Habakkuk. In the beginning of the book, the prophet is concerned about all the evil that is going on among God's people. He complains to God about this and God answers him, saying that he is going to send another nation to judge His people. The prophet is alarmed about this and again complains about how God could use an even more wicked nation to judge His wayward people. Again, God answers him basically saying that God will in turn judge the Babylonians. The final chapter of the book is Habakkuk's prayer to God. Here is Habakkuk 3:17-19.

Though the fig tree should not blossom

And there be no fruit on the vines,

Though the yield of the olive should fail

And the fields produce no food,

Though the flock should be cut off from the fold

And there be no cattle in the stalls,

Yet I will exult in the Lord,

I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
Lord God is my strength,

The

And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,

And makes me walk on my high places.

Briefly, please note a few things about joy that are seen in this remarkable prayer. First of all, we must recognize that joy is unconquerable. Notice that three phrases all start out with the word "though". As R.C. Sproul points out in his booklet, *Can I Have Joy in My Life?*, probably none of us have ever worried about our fig trees not blossoming. Yet, in a society based upon agriculture, having no crops or having no flocks or cattle would be a completely devastating thing. It would be much like us having no food in our cupboards or refrigerators, having the grocery stores and gas stations closed, and having no money in the bank. In the midst of these devastating situations, we can still “rejoice in the God of our salvation.”

The second observation is that joy is found in the Lord. As Habakkuk unfolds these difficult circumstances, he still realizes that he can find joy in God. We will explore this theme in a moment.

The next observation is that joy is based on gifts from God. Note that God is referred to as "the God of my salvation", and "the Lord God is my strength".

So, natural questions arise. What is joy? How do we find joy? How can joy be unconquerable, not based on my circumstances? Can I really have joy that lasts, that is permanent, and does not fade away? If we are honest with ourselves, I'm sure that all of us would acknowledge that greater joy, more lasting joy, a deep-down, unfading joy is something we all desire.

C. T. Studd was a famous missionary to China and Africa over a hundred years ago. On one of his voyages to China, the ship upon which he was sailing was captained by a hardened man who totally disliked Christianity and Christians. He would often study the Bible simply to be able to argue with the missionaries who often traveled on the ships he captained. When he heard that Studd was on his ship, the captain attacked him and his faith. Instead of arguing with him, Studd simply put his arm around the captain's shoulders and quietly said, "But, my friend, I have peace that passes all understanding and a joy that nothing can take away." The ship's captain paused for a moment, and before walking away, looked at Studd and said, "You're lucky dog." As the story is told, the sea captain became a rejoicing believer in Jesus Christ before their voyage was completed.

How do we become such "lucky dogs"? First, we must define joy. A dictionary would define joy as "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." In *Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Peter Beyerhaus defines joy as "the pleasant emotion resulting from the satisfaction of man's unquenchable thirst for a fuller life." One of the problems we face is that we often substitute joy for pleasing stimulus, or even thrills. In many of America's famous amusement parks, people will stand for hours in line to experience the thrill of a particular ride that may last for only a few minutes. The 13th-Century philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas, said "Man cannot live without joy; therefore when he is deprived of true spiritual joys it is necessary that he become addicted to carnal pleasures." We often substitute thrill for joy, or even happiness for joy. It is a poor decision.

So, again, how can we obtain true, lasting joy? I am going to summarize this with two statements. You must change your thinking. And, you must learn to look to the source of true joy, the Lord God Himself.

First of all, you must change your thinking. You can choose to be joyful. Henri Nouwen said, "Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day." In many places, the Bible commands us to be joyful. Here are a few examples.

We have already cited **Philippians 4:4**, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice!"

Psalms 32:11 – "Be glad in the LORD and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all *you* upright in heart!"

Psalms 66:1 – "Make a joyful shout to God, all the earth!"

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 - Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

If joy is something God commands us to do, it cannot be a thrill or happiness because a thrill or happiness is something that happens to us, or emotions that we experience. It is something over which we have no control. Retired pastor Stuart Briscoe of Elmbrook Church in Milwaukee, WI defines happiness in a tongue-twisting way. **“Many people feel that their happiness is directly related to their happenings. If their happenings happen to happen, the way they happen to want their happenings to happen, they are happy. But if their happenings don't happen to happen the way they happen to want their happenings to happen, they are unhappy!”**

The Bible, and modern psychology, are both very clear that the things upon which we choose to meditate are the things that direct our lives. And, you can decide the things upon which you want to meditate. So, you can choose to meditate and dwell upon things that bring you joy and not on the things that bring depression or discouragement. Again, consider Henri Nouwen: “Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”

The second thing you must do to obtain true, lasting joy is to look to the source of true joy, the Lord God Himself. You must change your perspective on the source of true, lasting joy. It is not based on circumstances, or even on earthly relationships, although these may be a blessing to you. As we noted earlier from Habakkuk chapter 3, joy is found in your relationship with God and not in the things of this life. As the prophet looked at the devastation around him (no fig trees blossoming, no fruit on the vine, etc.), he made the remarkable statement: “Yet I will exult in the Lord, I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.”

Ultimately, lasting joy comes from a right relationship with God. The devotional writer, Oswald Chambers, wrote: “Be rightly related to God, find your joy there, and out of you will flow rivers of living water.” To return to the amusement park illustration, people stand in long lines for hours waiting for a thrill, never realizing that lasting joy is available at all times, without any wait. This is because joy comes from seeking God.

Here are a few thoughts about how understanding a right relationship with God can foster joy in your life.

Recognize that Jesus possesses joy and desires to share His joy with you. Many years ago I remember reading that author Sherwood Wirt surveyed all the major books that listed the character qualities of God. He noticed that none of these theology books listed joy as a character quality of God. Yet, Jesus made it clear that He possesses joy. As part of the Jesus prayer before His crucifixion, in John 17:13, Jesus prayed, “But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have **My joy** made full in themselves.” And, in John 15:11, Jesus said, “These things I have spoken to you so that **My joy** may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.”

So, Jesus possesses joy. It is part of his character. So as you draw closer to Jesus, you become more like Him. His attributes become your attributes. His joy becomes your joy. His joy becomes fullness of joy for you. *You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever* (Psalm 16:11).

Joy comes from the Bible. The prophet Jeremiah said, “Your words were found and I ate them,

And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts” (Jeremiah 15:16). Personally, I have found the Bible to be a source of great delight and encouragement. If you need a Bible, please contact us and we will be happy to provide you with one.

Joy comes from realizing your sins are forgiven. In Psalm 51, King David confesses his sin to God. In verse 12 of this beautiful Psalm, David prays "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation

And sustain me with a willing spirit.” David realized that part of the forgiveness of sins was the reestablishment of joy in his life.

At the end of this article, I will explain how a person can draw near to Jesus and realize forgiveness of sins. My personal experience illustrates that there is a joy, a freshness knowing that my sins are forgiven through the work of Jesus Christ.

Realize that the blessings of the eternal life are a present reality. In Luke chapter 10, Jesus sends His followers off on a mission. They were to visit the surrounding cities to proclaim the Kingdom of God and heal the sick. In verse 17, His followers return, “with joy.” They had experienced remarkable success on their mission, even apparently seeing God heal people. Jesus’ response to them is interesting. “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing will injure you. Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven (v. 19 & 20).” The disciples had just seen the amazing power of God, something about which they could be excited, even joyful. But, Jesus said they were to rejoice because their names were written in heaven. By this, Jesus meant that they had eternal life.

In conclusion, joy comes from changing your thinking and by learning to look to the source of true joy, the Lord God Himself.

We must understand that joy ultimately comes from our relationship with God. Christianity teaches that there is a living and personal God who made all things and created people to have a close relationship with Him. This relationship was broken because people did things that displeased God. But, God has made a way for this close friendship to be restored through the life, death, and Resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ.

So how do you have this close relationship with God restored? I like to summarize it with two statements - you must believe in Jesus and you must receive Jesus. "But as many as **received Him**, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who **believe in His name**."

To believe in Jesus means to trust Him and to rely upon His death on the Cross as the full and complete payment for your sins. It also means believing in His Resurrection, trusting that Jesus is still alive now and that He offers a new life of the abundance, peace, and joy to all who will repent and believe.

To receive Jesus means to invite Him into your life as your personal Savior and Lord.

The person believes and receives Jesus through a simple prayer of faith. If you would like to believe and receive Jesus, you may use the words of the following prayer.

“Dear God, I believe that You made all things and created me to have a close relationship with You. I realize my sin has separated me from You. I now turn from my sin and ask for Your forgiveness. Thank You for sending Jesus Christ to die on the Cross for my sin and for raising Him from the dead so that I might have eternal life. I open my heart to You and ask You into my life. I also recognize my need for You and commit my life to You. With Your help, I now promise to obey You and choose to follow You. Jesus, thank You for dying for me, for Your free pardon, for Your gift of eternal life, and for hearing my prayer and coming into my life. Amen.”

If you have expressed this prayer to God, or have questions about how believing and receiving Jesus may be of benefit to you, please contact us. You can e-mail us (H4HH@rpcnh.org), or call the church (412-486-1167). If no one is available to answer, please leave a message. We will be happy to return your call quickly.

Thank you! We trust that you will increasingly experience true and lasting joy as you seek to draw closer and closer to God through Jesus.