

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
June 27, 2021

## **Growing in Joy**

Isaiah 35:1-10

Today we conclude this month's series of sermons on Christian maturity. We began by focusing on wisdom as one of the key marks of a growing follower of Jesus. Living a wise and godly life, grounded in the fear of the Lord, is a sign of spiritual development. Then we focused on vocation as another significant trait when it comes to making progress in holiness. God calls us to participate in his work in the world through all the forms that work takes in our own lives. And as we respond to God's summons, we join in Christ's mission of making God's identity, and his redeeming love, visible in the world. Last Sunday, we focused on love as a third characteristic of a maturing Christian. This love for God, for one another in the church, and for all people, is the outworking of the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Today, as we bring things to a close, we turn to our text from Isaiah, and see a fourth trait of a maturing Christian. In addition to growing in wisdom, growing in vocation, and growing in love, God also intends us to grow in joy. There's a joyful tone that runs throughout our Scripture passage, which might at first seem strange, considering the circumstances of God's people. At present, it feels like the joy of the Lord is being drowned out by the jeering of their oppressors. The Israelites are still in exile. They've lost their land, their temple, and their sovereignty. They feel and experience the suffering of exile in their very bodies, in the form of "feeble hands," "weak knees," and "fearful hearts" (vv. 3-4). Their despair is deep and dense. There appears to be no way out.

But God has not abandoned them. He confronts their fear with a promise: "Your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you" (v. 4). When God comes to rescue them, things will change, dramatically. For one thing, bodies will be restored. And not only the human part of God's creation, but the non-human part as well. Desert environs will gush with water. Desolate places will be transformed into paradise.

Every 10 to 15 years, parts of California experience a "super bloom," as wildflowers wake up from sleep and blanket the terrain. The visual impact is especially striking in the Mojave Desert, particularly at Death Valley. When conditions are perfect, the desert fills with a sea of gold, purple, pink, or white flowers (Display slide). It's quite a sight when the once dusty brown hills get carpeted with color. The transformation is absolutely joyful. So it is at the beginning of Isaiah's proclamation of what God will do in redeeming his people. "The wilderness will rejoice and blossom . . . ; it will rejoice greatly and bloom" (vv. 1-2). According to the prophet, the joy of the Lord's coming isn't confined to human beings. The rest of God's creation will join in the gladness as well.

If you've been paying attention to the plant life and landscaping around the entrance to our church, you've noticed that we've had plenty of colorful joy blossoming in recent weeks, thanks especially to the diligent work of Amber Krivitsky. She has put a lot of time and energy into caring for the flowers that greet us with gladness when we gather to worship God. Add to these the flowers that individuals contribute to our communion table display

each Sunday, and you get a deeper sense of one of the ways that the joy of the Lord weaves its way into our life as a congregation.

Christian philosopher Dallas Willard has described God as “the most joyous being in the universe.” Willard tells about an experience of staring at a beach during some time he spent in South Africa. He says:

[I realized] that God sees this all the time. He sees it, experiences it, knows it from every possible point of view, this and billions of other scenes like and unlike it, in this and billions of other worlds. Great tidal waves of joy must constantly wash through his being ....

We pay a lot of money to get a tank with a few tropical fish in it and never tire of looking at their [beauty] and marvelous forms and movements. But God has *seas full of them*, which he constantly enjoys ....

Willard concludes, “All of the good and beautiful things from which we occasionally drink tiny droplets of soul-exhilarating joy, God continuously experiences in all their breadth and depth and richness.”<sup>1</sup>

God takes joy in what he has made, and the redemption of what he has made, especially his people. After giving us images of the earth transformed by God’s coming, Isaiah gives us images of people transformed by God’s coming. Hands that have grown weak are made strong. Knees that have grown unsteady are made firm. Hearts and minds that race with anxiety are made calm. Eyes that have been unable to see will be opened. Ears that have been unable to hear will be unstopped. Muscles that have been unable to move will leap. Tongues that have been unable to speak will shout. All of these capacities, redeemed and restored, will be devoted to celebration and the expression of joy. So joy is at the very heart of who God is, what God has done, and who we are as his people.

But joy doesn’t mean living in denial about or trying to shelter ourselves from the pain and problems of the present. No, we come by our joy honestly, with eyes, hearts, and minds wide open to the sins, injustices, and unrighteousness of the world. We don’t arrive at joy by ignoring the reality of suffering, but by facing squarely the brokenness and hardships of life. In other words, the call to rejoice doesn’t mean pretending that everything is okay when we know full well that it’s not. Rather, the call to rejoice means realism about what’s wrong, and remembrance of what God has done to make things right through Christ.

Author Gordon Smith says, “Women and men of deep joy are not those who refuse to sorrow or grieve; rather they are those who sorrow but who have learned that this is not where they choose to live. They come back to the center.”<sup>2</sup> This emotional center, the heart of our identity and mission, the tone of our life as God’s people, is joy. Smith calls joy our “default mode.”<sup>3</sup> It’s what we keep coming back to. It’s what awaits us at the end and sustains us along the way in our journey as God’s people.

Being a joyful person means that who you are and how you live is grounded in a deep and inward confidence in the presence, goodness, and purposes of God. You rest yourself in the reality of his sovereignty and his unfailing love, trusting that God, despite all appearances to the contrary, has everything in hand, and that his redeeming plans will prevail. Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, is Lord. God is in control. His forgiveness has changed everything. And what he has begun in Christ will be brought to completion. True, sin, evil, and death are for real, but they are only for a season. In the end, God’s goodness will triumph, as he fulfills his promise to make all things new. Being a joyful person means resting in this conviction and living accordingly.

"The ransomed of the Lord will return," declares Isaiah. "They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads" (v. 10). Where there's joy, there's singing. Though in many churches, during the ongoing pandemic, there's not as much singing as there used to be. One news report from this past week highlighted circumstances in England, where for the most part there's still a ban on congregational singing during indoor worship services. Members of the worship band may raise their voices in song, but the congregation can't join in. In one church, those who register to attend the in-person service are asked to agree to a set of terms and conditions, including that "congregational singing and chanting is not permitted." As the team on stage performs, attendees are asked to engage in worship in other ways. One pastor summarized things this way: "To hear more and more about how much God loves us through the sermons and to not have an outlet to let it all out, it can feel like a dam ready to burst."<sup>4</sup>

Here in our worship gathering this morning, we're still singing from behind masks. But at least we're still singing. It's partly a testimony to the fact that our emotional center, individually and together, hasn't changed. We're still people of joy. We're redeemed sinners who believe that the Lord is with us. And where God is present, joy is present. As one preacher has put it, "Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room."<sup>5</sup> Or in the midst of an ongoing pandemic. Among a congregation of God's people, in a place like this, on a morning like this.

Congregational worship is where we express our joy. It's where we nurture and cultivate our joy. It's not the only way we do so, but it's a critical one. What's true of the other marks of Christian maturity we've explored—wisdom, vocation, and love—is also true of joy. It's a gift of God that not only has to be received but also tended and developed. Through worship, the study of the Scriptures, prayer, fellowship, service, and ministry you grow deeper in joy. You progress further into the gladness that comes from being reconciled to God and to others. And the more you know of this joy that comes from being redeemed, the more you want to know. The more you want to grow in the gladness of the Lord.

This gladness also becomes a form of witness to others. When you participate in God's joy, and it sinks more deeply into who you are, sharing your faith with others becomes more than just a religious obligation. It becomes the natural expression of your union with Christ. Your joy in the Lord becomes a means of attracting others to him. As one person has put it, "If we can convince people that we are onto something that's full of joy, they'll stampede one another to follow us."<sup>6</sup>

In view of God's promises, Isaiah reminds God's people that one day, "Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away" (v. 10). And in today's Scripture reading from John, Jesus tells his worried and fearful disciples, then and now: "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (16:22). The joy we experience now, and that comes to expression in our gathering here today, this joy in the midst of our broken lives in a fallen world, is a foretaste of what God has promised for all those who are in Christ, when the journey of the redeemed is done, and God's purposes are complete.

<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperOne, 1998) 62-64.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon T. Smith. *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014. Kindle Edition.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Called to Be Saints*.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Shellnut, "O For Six Unmasked Tongues to Sing: England Still Quieting Worship." Christianity Today website. June 23, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/june/england-church-singing-worship-covid-regulations.html> (June 24, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy." *The Living Pulpit* (October-December 1996) 16.

<sup>6</sup> William Treadwell, *Leadership*, Vol. 1, No. 3.