

June 24, 2012

The Summer of Joy: “The Power of Choice”

Habakkuk 3:17-18

Habakkuk 3:17-18 NLT

Even though the fig trees have no blossoms,
and there are no grapes on the vines;
even though the olive crop fails,
and the fields lie empty and barren;
even though the flocks die in the fields,
and the cattle barns are empty,
yet I will rejoice in the LORD!
I will be joyful in the God of my salvation!

Habakkuk teaches that joy does not depend on circumstances but can be embraced even in the worst of times. Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, there are no grapes on the vine, the olive crop fails, the fields are barren, the flocks die, the barn is empty, finances are bad, things are not going the way I want them to go, YET I WILL rejoice in the Lord! Joy doesn't just happen; it involves an act of the will.

Did you ever have “one of those days?” You know what I'm talking about – a day where it seems like nothing is going right; a day filled with one frustrating moment after another. I remember having one of those days, when I told myself, “if one more thing happens I'm going to lose it!” I think it was shortly after having that thought that I discovered that water was overflowing out of the basement toilet bowl, out of the bathroom and into the next room. You know the panic you feel when something is overwhelming like water overflowing that you can't stop?

Now, we've had this problem before, it was nothing new, but this was one of those rare occasions – because I didn't always deal with it this way –but on that occasion I literally started laughing. You know, if the enemy is going to attack, he can't be so obvious. And it became crystal clear to me (not the water, but the thought) that I was facing a choice. I could throw away whatever joy I was clinging to by a thread, or I could choose to clean up the mess willingly and happily. It was like suddenly a door of choice opened before me. I was going to have to clean it up anyway, but I was aware of an attitude choice I had to make while I was cleaning up the mess. On that particular day I chose joy, not that I always choose joy, but I thought today I'd share one of my success stories. I know my wife is sitting back there thinking, “When did you clean up our overflowing toilet happily?” It happened ...once.

The point is: happiness is a choice; or perhaps a series of choices or steps taken one after another in the direction of staying joyful. You, no matter who you are, no matter what your circumstances, can take these steps right now. The wounds in your heart will not be healed by a one-time miracle but by making small choices, one after another, to believe rather than doubt, to be joyful rather than miserable. Troubles,

problems, suffering is inevitable, but misery is optional. You can't choose to avoid pain in your life, but you could choose to avoid joy.

Many years ago I was being trained to be a counselor. As part of my training I sat in on actual counseling sessions to observe and take notes. On one occasion the counselee shared that he was often moody. He said he actually liked feeling sorry for himself, and his self-pity sessions that could last for days. He said he knew he was no fun to be around during those times. And when he would realize this he said he would feel horrible about the way he acted, he would feel ashamed, and the guilt was hard to deal with, only giving him another reason to beat himself up. He said he really didn't want to be that way any more. And the counselor said, "so stop it!" I was waiting for some deep counseling technique, not, "so stop it!" But the counselee look at the counselor with a look on his face that said, "wow, I never thought of that!"

Misery is an addiction. When you want to be free of an addiction you have to admit you need God and you have to make a clean break from the addiction. Right? If you are addicted to alcohol you must admit you need God to help you, because you are powerless to kick the addiction on your own, but with that comes the realization that you can never touch a drink again, if you are addicted to a drug, you must never touch that drug again, if you are addicted to pornography, you have to stay away from pornography. This is also true of unhappiness; it can no longer be an option.

Whenever a problem arises one must choose some other way besides self-pity to deal with it. This will happen by recognizing that there is a door of choice in the center of your will and then stepping through that door.

God wants to give you joy, but you must take it. Lasting joy comes only by choice, through making many, small decisions, one day at a time. Once you see that, it's not hard to choose. The hard part is admitting you have a choice.

I am discovering that perhaps the main obstacle to joy is a lack of faith. Unhappy people choose to be that way because they just don't believe in joy. They believe in same-old-same-old. They have to change beliefs.

Some people think it is a good thing to be sad; that it's being realistic; they may even believe it makes them more saintly. Moodiness is not godly, it's self-centered, and worse, it is a way to get back at God for everything that has ever gone wrong in your life.

Are you unhappy today? Ask yourself what you believe. What is your excuse for believing you can't live this day in joy? Do you believe happiness is good, right, appropriate, and allowed? Then do something about it.

James 2:17 NLT

So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.

Faith and actions go hand in hand. If you really believe in something, you will work for what you believe in. That's true of being joyful always. If you don't believe in it, you will not work to make it happen. Joy is a gift of God that He gives to us freely, but as with all His gifts we must show a willingness to accept it. Like salvation, joy is a free gift of God that cannot be earned, yet even a gift must be opened and actively enjoyed by the recipient. Do you believe God wants you to be joyful always? How might your actions change if you changed your belief about happiness?

Let's say for example that you hate your job. What would happen if you truly believed that you could be happy in your work, either in your present job or in a new career? If you really believed this you would start to move toward this goal. You would make changes, you would act differently, you would sacrifice, you would do whatever it took to follow your dream. Instead of feeling trapped, you would believe there must be a way, and you would seek it until you found it. Just as Jesus promise in Luke 11:9 when He said, "seek and you will find"?

If you were given the chance to be joyful always, for the rest of your life, wouldn't you jump at the opportunity? The Bible makes that very offer, yet many are hesitant, reluctant to accept even the thought of it. The Lord wants His children to live in joy, and there's a way to do it if we'll trust Him.

The way begins with commitment. When you committed your life to Jesus you were saying, "I will follow you, Jesus no matter what." Well, why not make a similar commitment in regard to joy – to rejoice in the Lord always, no matter what? When you really think about it, isn't it a lack of faith that keep us from this? I think we can all agree that the Bible teaches to be joyful always, yet deep down are we really convinced of that? Are you convinced that such a life is possible for you?

Abraham Lincoln once said, "People are just about as happy as they make up their mind to be."

Some may not admit they are unhappy, yet neither can they admit to being deeply happy. They stop short of abundant joy. For joy to become part of your character you must choose to take hold of it. Choose joy and keep choosing it under all conditions, until gradually it becomes a habit. Life changes not through one experience, but by making small, hard, daily choices.

A commitment to joy will give you a place to stand against all the sudden changes this world can throw at you. You don't want to live in fear wondering if some tragedy will come into and ruin your life, do you? Well, you will not have that fear if you believe it is possible to rejoice in all circumstances. Be committed to joy come what may. Resolve deep within that you are fixing your eyes on Jesus, and will not letting anything interrupt your joy in Him.

Remove all options to be gloomy and a profound shift takes place in the soul. All the power of heaven is released to help you when you choose that power by faith. Choose

to be committed to joy and you will be amazed at how God begins to pour out His joy upon you in the most surprising ways. We cannot engineer our own joyous life, but when by faith we take joy by the hand it will do the rest.

God wants you to be joyful always, and it is possible in Jesus. Wherever there is true faith in Jesus, there is joy. Peter wrote...

1 Peter 1:8b NIV

You believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

When you believe in Jesus you will be filled with that kind of joy. Even in times of trials. Let me quote Peter again:

1 Peter 1:6 NIV

You greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

And this is how Peter ended his letter:

1 Peter 5:12 NIV

I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand fast in it.

In order to experience the true grace of God you must stand fast in it. Don't ever except a version of the Gospel (and therefore a way of life) without joy. As a matter of fact Paul wrote: Galatians 1:8 NLT

Let God's curse fall on anyone, including us or even an angel from heaven, who preaches a different kind of Good News than the one we preached to you.

When Jesus was born the angels said it was (Luke 2:10 NIV):

Good news of great joy.

Accept no substitute. Why settle for a religion that doesn't lift your heart and make you sing?

Many times Paul refers to his message as "my gospel" or "my Good News." Has the Good News about Jesus become your Good News? Have you discovered the gospel for yourself? You can't have anyone else's faith; you can only have your own. The message of Jesus found in the Bible is tailor made for you, perfectly designed to fit your need. It will work for you; it will bring you, "an inexpressible and glorious joy." That's how you will know it is your Good News. This Good News of Jesus has your own name stamped on it.

In 2 Corinthians 4:16 NCV Paul wrote:

So we do not give up. Our physical body is becoming older and weaker, but our spirit inside us is made new every day.

Are you being made new today, or are you giving up? Yesterday's joy will not do for today. Each day needs a fresh supply. Each day we need to be renewed by receiving or being reminded, with joy, the Good News of Jesus Christ all over again. It will renew your soul day after day. It is the true grace of God, and you must stand fast in it.

Paul wrote (Colossians 3:15)

Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts.

Well, let the joy that comes from Christ rule in your hearts too. You cannot control joy, but you can give joy permission to control you. Let joy take over your life and it will.