

Got Joy?
Series: Life to the Fullest
Isaiah 12, Nehemiah 8:1-12, John 15:5-11

“I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly.” “My purpose,” Jesus said, “is to give them a rich and satisfying life.” “Them” is us. If you are a follower of Jesus, these words are for you. Jesus said His purpose in coming, *the purpose of His life* was to give us – to give *you* – LIFE. Abundant life, full life, overflowing and rich and satisfying life. More and better life than you can even imagine. *Now*. Not only in heaven after we die. *Here and now*. That’s why He came. That’s why He died. That’s why He rose again on the third day. So we could have life. Since Easter, we’ve been talking about this eternal kind of life that is available to followers of Jesus because of His resurrection.

And we’ve said that it’s a LIFE characterized by HOPE and PEACE. Today I want to speak with you about a third quality of this new life we have in Jesus. And I must admit, it’s my favorite. Today I get to speak to you about JOY. Theologian Lewis Smedes has said this: “To miss out on joy is to miss out on the reason for your existence.” Wow. Joy is not optional for Christ-followers, according to the Bible.

There are more than 400 instances of words for joy and rejoicing in the Bible. So joy is a major theme in the Scriptures. More than two dozen times we are commanded to sing for joy and shout for joy. More than two dozen times *each*. It’s a command, not a suggestion. Not a “Gee, it would be nice if you would sing for joy once in a while.” We are instructed to be jubilant with joy. I love that! The Bible also says we can be clothed with joy, pray with joy, and be filled with joy. In the Old Testament particularly, joy is not only an inward feeling, but an audible and/or visible expression. Not only singing and shouting, but also dancing, clapping, or feasting. Paul instructs the church to rejoice always. *Always*. C.S. Lewis wrote: “Joy is the serious business of heaven.” Does that sound like a contradiction? Joy as serious business?

Now, I’m not talking about “happiness.” Do you ever think about what would make you truly happy? “If only I could...” “If only he/she would...” then I’d be happy. “If only [fill in the blank] *then* I could enjoy my life. Happiness is something very different from joy. Happiness is based on happenings. Circumstances. If my hazelnut latte has just the right amount of hazelnut, it makes me happy. If it doesn’t – not so much. We tend to worship at the altar of personal happiness. We believe, after all, that one of our “inalienable rights” is the pursuit of happiness. It’s right there in the Declaration of Independence. It’s quite American, this pursuit of happiness. But let me be clear: It may be American, but it is not biblical. In fact, *nowhere* in the Bible does God advise His people to pursue happiness.

One of my favorite biblical teachings about joy is found in the book of Nehemiah. You may not be too familiar with Nehemiah. After the first wave of Jewish exiles returned from in Babylon and rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, in the middle of the 5th century BC, Ezra and Nehemiah were allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city. And after the wall had been completed, we read at the beginning of chapter 8: *Neh. 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-12.*

V. 9: The word of God – when we let it – convicts us and challenges us because it tells us who God is and who we are. It tells us what God expects of His children, of those He calls “my people.” And it reveals how far short we have fallen in living as the loving, holy, devoted, compassionate people God commands us to be. Perhaps this is why they were weeping. They saw how far they were from being the people God called them to be.

V. 10-12: It was a day sacred to the Lord. A holy day. What we now call a holiday. And so Nehemiah instructed them not to grieve but rather to celebrate with great joy. And they did. “Because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.” Understanding the word of God, *truly* understanding it, *all* of it, ought to lead to great joy. Because it speaks, not only of God’s judgment for sin, but of God’s love and grace and forgiveness. It speaks of the God who makes a way where there seems to be no way. And so understanding the word of God leads to joy. Now, we must allow the word of God to reveal our sin, our unworthiness, but do not get stuck there. Do not focus on your sin, your unworthiness, your failures. That will surely steal your joy. We must always acknowledge and admit our sin, but do not get stuck there. We very often get stuck there. I have often got stuck there. And it caused me to grieve. Don’t do that, Nehemiah says. Rather, focus on God and His love and His forgiveness and His promise to use you *in spite of* your sin. This will bring you joy. And the joy of the LORD is your strength. Knowing and trusting God’s love and His forgiveness will lead to great joy. And *that joy* is your strength. Joy not in ourselves and how good *we* are. Joy in God and how loving and forgiving and good *God* is. The *joy of the Lord* is your strength.

Have you ever known somebody who was just joyful all the time, no matter what they were going through, no matter what the circumstance? Have you ever wondered how they did it? Were they on some kind of medication? Well, maybe, but not necessarily. Maybe they knew what Nehemiah knew: The joy of the LORD is your strength. That word ‘strength’ in the Hebrew means place or means of safety, protection, refuge, shelter. Maybe they were joyful all the time because they relied on God to protect and shelter them in the midst of life’s challenges and griefs. Not to remove the challenges, but to provide shelter and protection *in the midst* of the challenges. Maybe they were able to be joyful even in the midst of the most difficult circumstances because they took refuge in who God is and what God is able to do. Maybe they really believed the word of God that says that with God *all things* are possible. Maybe the joy of the LORD was their strength.

But you will say to me, “How is it possible to be joyful, to rejoice, to sing for joy, in a world like ours? In the midst of war, swine flu, job loss, children starving to death, marital breakups, cancer, etc. etc. etc.? There are lots of circumstances that have the potential to suck the joy right out of you. Just read the newspaper or CNN.com. Joy is possible even *in the midst* of things like these, because it is an understanding of life that allows you to see beyond any particular event to God, who stands above all events and *ultimately* – listen – has control over them. But sometimes, it’s not so much the world situation that steals our joy as it is what is happening in our own homes or in our own hearts. Another thing that keeps us from experiencing joy is preoccupation with self.

It’s the *joy of the Lord* which is strength, not the joy of Kathi. It’s knowing what *God* says about me and my circumstances and about *His* power and purposes and possibilities that leads to joy.

Not trusting how things appear to me. Not trusting in my own power to change my circumstances or following my own ideas about how to make my life better. Rather than be so focused on yourself, so preoccupied with yourself, your pain, your challenges, focus on God. Focus on the many small and not so small ways God comes to you each day. And focus on others. One sure fire way to get your mind off your own troubles and experience joy is to help somebody else.

Another joy-stealer is busyness and hurry. This is a big one for most of us. We are so very busy, we hurry around all the time, we miss the little joys God tries to give us each day. We don't take time to "smell the roses" as the cliché goes. We rush from one very important activity to another, we rush our children from one thing to another. And when we encounter something that slows us down, we tend to get a little testy. A bit annoyed. Downright angry, even. Not much joy there. No peace like a river here. More like an ocean of rage, sometimes.

John Ortberg again: "Joy in this world is always joy "in spite of" something." Joy *in spite of* pain. Joy *in spite of* disappointment. Joy *in spite of* fear. Joy *in spite of* apparently unanswered prayer. Joy *in spite of* disease. Joy *in spite of* economic devastation. Listen: you can *decide* to be joyful *in spite of* whatever is going on in your life that threatens to steal your joy. This is not just the power of positive thinking. Joy is not so much a *feeling* as it is a *decision*. Psalm 118:24: "*This is the day the LORD has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it.*" You gotta make a decision. Listen: God has given you today, this day. That's all you're really assured of. Nobody knows what's gonna happen tomorrow. And you can't do anything about yesterday. Do not let what happened to you yesterday or last week or last year or 30 years ago steal your joy. *This is the day you have. This is the day God has given to you. You can decide to rejoice in it. You can decide to rejoice in it. You can decide to rejoice in it. Now, you can also decide not to rejoice in it. And this is a key decision. Because "the joy of the LORD is your strength."* Remember the Hebrew = Your place or means of safety, protection, refuge, shelter. See, if the devil can get your joy, he gets your strength. If the enemy can take away your joy through circumstances, he also gets your strength, he removes your shelter. And you are left exposed and unprotected and therefore open to further attack. Caught with your spiritual pants down, if you will. So you gotta *decide* to rejoice. You gotta *decide* to believe God, to trust that God's Word is true, and to stand on the promises of God rather than how things appear to you. Because *that* is where you will find joy: In the Lord. And that joy is strength and shelter and protection and safety through the storms and struggles of life.

How do we get 'the joy of the LORD'? Well, we don't get it by seeking joy. We get it by seeking God. Because joy is a gift of God, a product of the presence of God. In fact, theologian, Teilhard de Chardin wrote that: "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." Psalm 16:11: You [that is, God] have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. Gal. 5:22: The fruit of the Spirit is...joy. It's the joy "of the Lord." It's God's joy that takes up residence in us.

John 15:5-11. These are among the last words Jesus spoke to His disciples before His death. And He speaks of the organic connection between Himself and those who wish to follow Him. It is the life-giving, fruit-bearing connection as of a branch to a vine. When we remain in Him – when we stay connected to Jesus, we bear much fruit. When we don't stay connected – apart

from Him, cut off from the vine – we can do nothing. And He says that the way we remain in His love – the way we stay connected to Jesus' love – is by obeying Him. You see, loving God *always, always, always*, includes obeying God. And this is our source of joy, Jesus says. When we remain connected to Jesus, obeying Him and experiencing His love and the Father's love, we have joy.

“I have told you this,” Jesus said, “so that My joy may be in you and that your joy maybe complete.” When we obey God, we get Jesus' joy. Can you imagine what Jesus' joy is like? He lived in complete obedience to and communion with the Father, all the time, no matter what. And His joy was complete, full, and overflowing joy. This is what He offers to us. *His joy in us*. So, if you are lacking joy today, check your connection to Jesus. If you are lacking joy, check your obedience to Jesus. Listen: Christ-followers ought to be the most joyful and joy-filled people on the face of the earth. Because not only do we have the Old Testament Law to teach us how to live. We have the gospel – the “good news of great joy which shall be for all people.” Why is the gospel “good news of great joy”? Because the gospel says that Jesus lived and Jesus died so that we could be forgiven and cleansed of our sin and live a new life, a right life, a life right with God, right in God's sight. The kind of life God intends for us to live.

And not only do we *know* what this life is supposed to look like, we get the *power* we need to live it: The Holy Spirit, God in us. And so therefore, Paul writes, “there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” *Rom. 8:1*. To be “in Christ Jesus” means that when you trust Jesus as the forgiver of your sins and decide to follow Him as the leader of your life, you are ‘in.’ And when God looks at you, all He sees is Jesus. Because you are *in* Him. And there is no condemnation for anything you have done. And so His joy is in you. And your joy is full and complete. Christ-followers ought to be the most joyful people in the world because we know that “all things work together for good for those who love God.” *Rom. 8:28*. Because we know that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” *Rom. 8:39*. I looked up ‘nothing’ in the Greek lexicon. Guess what? It means nothing.

No thing. No thing can get in the way of God's love for you. No thing can stop God from loving you. No thing. Nothing. There is no condemnation. No condemnation, but loads of joy. Joy is God's basic character. I mean, after all, God commanded – *commanded* – His people to worship Him by celebrating great feasts several times a year. Festivals like the one Nehemiah instructed the people to enjoy. Week-long celebrations. The fat portions and sweet drinks. Our God is a God of feasting and celebration and joy. Do you remember what Jesus' first miracle was? Turning water into wine at a wedding party. Jesus was a party guy. He was usually in trouble with the religious powers-that-be because of the dinner parties He went to. He was always sitting down to eat with the wrong people. Sinners, and prostitutes, and undesirables and such. People much like ourselves.

And so it is fitting that we remember and celebrate God's love and Jesus' sacrifice at a table. We do not consider this an altar. An altar is a place of sacrifice. There is no longer any need for sacrifice – Jesus was the final sacrifice for sin. And so this is a communion table, a table where we feast with Jesus. A table where we feast *on* Jesus. A table of reconciliation and restoration. A table of celebration and joy.