May 16, 2021

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WHAT I LEARNED FROM THE SMOKE DETECTOR

1 Peter 1:8-12

Last Sunday we had a family celebration for both Mother’s Day and Laurie’s birthday. Our entire family, four generations, gathered at our house for a barbecue. With 4 grandkids aged 5 and under it was a bit chaotic, and full of joy. At one point near the end of the evening, little one year old Wesley was really wound up. He was excited by all the people being together, and he was running around the house almost maniacally. We have a little kids’ rocking chair and a short stool, and he bounced back and forth between sitting on one, then getting up and sitting on the other. Watching him was hilarious. There was a lot of smiling and a lot of robust laughter going on. And it was wonderful. It was joyful, and there are few things in life as great as experiencing joy.

Irish poet William Butler Yeats described a countryman this way, “Being Irish, he had an abiding sense of tragedy, which sustained him through temporary periods of joy.” A lot of us have a sense of the tragedy of life that is always there in the background. Yes, we may have brief bouts of joy, but they don’t last.

Everyone wants joy, but much of the time it is in short supply in the world. Ernest Hemingway said, “Happiness in intelligent people is the rarest thing I know.” He claimed if you are smart, you’re unhappy. That’s pretty depressing. But I take issue with him. No doubt if he were alive he would be greatly upset to know that Rick Myatt disagrees with him. I don’t just think, I know it is possible to be joyful no matter one’s level of intelligence. I would like you to think about joy with me as we look at 1 Peter 1:8-12.

JOY IS POSSIBLE AT ALL TIMES

Recently I had a day where I felt deluged with how much pain there is in this world. There is a young couple we know who have been going through a rough time. The husband had just gotten a job as a pilot with American Airlines. Just before he was to begin his training, the corona virus hit and the airline industry collapsed. His job disappeared. They managed to survive financially, but almost immediately after that job disappeared, while his wife was pregnant with their third child, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She delayed treatment until she delivered the baby, then she began a long, grueling course of chemo treatments. She has endured with great courage and spirit. Just a few weeks ago she had her last treatment. Right after that one of their children suddenly began having seizures.

It seems like this poor family is being battered with one body blow after another. I was stunned by bad news from another young friend who is dealing with cancer. I could go on at length telling tales of woe, but this is not news to you. Life is full of pain. Then we hear that followers of Jesus should be full of joy. Are we supposed to have joy when life is hard? What are we supposed to do, pretend to be joyful? Is the Christian life a matter of developing acting ability? I’ll look joyful and act joyful even though I’m coming apart at the seams on the inside. Is that how it’s supposed to work?

Literally Peter said the believers that he wrote to “rejoiced with an inexpressible joy that is glorious.” He said the joy they had was inexpressible. Their joy was so great there was no way that language could describe it. The word for joy meant to be merry, to be glad. This wasn’t some religious “joy” that looks for all the world like dour unhappiness. This was true joy.

In fact, Peter said it was “glorious” joy. What do you think of when you hear someone say something was glorious? Here’s what I never think: I had an appointment with the dentist and it was glorious. Glorious means it was the best, it was spectacular, it was something you wish you could do again. None of that applies to a dental appointment. Glorious is superlative. It is full of splendor, almost magical. I asked Laurie what her favorite meals she’s ever had were. I was sure I knew what her number 1 would be, and I was right. It was a meal we had at Mama’s Fish House on Maui. The timing of the meal, the weather, the scenery, the food, were all perfect. Laurie began crying during the meal. I asked why and she said, “Because this is all so beautiful, so perfect.” When she recalled that event she said it was glorious. It was so spectacular, so beautiful, so splendid that it made her cry. That is the kind of joy those people had.

The crucial point here is *this profound joy did not come from their circumstances*! They did not have glorious joy because their lives were so good, they had it *in spite of their situation*! They were outsiders. They were marginalized and mistreated. They were poor, the kind of poor we can’t even imagine. Peter said of them in verse 6. “You may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” Their situation was grievous. It was full of all kinds of trials. In 1 Peter 4:12 the apostle said, “Do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you.”

These people had glorious joy, joy so profound they couldn’t express it in words, in the middle of circumstances that could accurately be called a fiery ordeal. What that says to me is joy, the real thing, not an imitation, is possible whatever our situation in life.

This is verified by another group of first century Christians, one that Paul referred to in 2 Corinthians 8. He told the Christians of Corinth about the Macedonian churches up to the north of them. In verse 2 he said, “In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” They lived in extreme poverty and very severe trial. Their situation was so bad Paul used redundancy to describe it. The word “severe” means extreme. But Paul said they had “very severe trial.” The word “very” is already included in the meaning of “severe,” but Paul added it anyway because their situation was so bad. In the middle of that grim, pounding, debilitating circumstance, those people had “overflowing joy.” Not just joy, but joy so rich and full it spilled over onto everyone and everything around them.

I have spoken about joy before, and on a couple of occasions learned of people who have essentially said that what I taught was unrealistic. I understand that response. Laurie, Carissa and Wesley have all had colds this week. It is Wesley’s first. He wasn’t joyful. Colds bring on a crisis for Laurie because they always bring her to a point where she feels like crying because she can’t breathe through her nose, and she can’t stand that. She doesn’t consider that gloriously joyful. It is not normal to be joyful when you are feeling miserable.

Yes, I get it. But those early Christians tell us that it is possible to have glorious, overflowing joy, even when one’s circumstances are the farthest thing from joyous. They were dealing with circumstances worse than any most of us have ever experienced and they had profound joy. That brings me to my next point.

JOY IS GOD’S WILL FOR US

Scripture explicitly states God wants us to have joy. In Philippians 4:4 Paul said, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice!” He didn’t say rejoice a lot, or rejoice most of the time. He said “rejoice always,” and in case we didn’t really believe him he said, “I will say it again, rejoice.” Why do you suppose he added that second statement? I think it’s because he knew that someone, probably most people, would say, “You don’t really mean that, Paul. Who can rejoice all the time?” Paul’s assertion was in Christ, we can.

In Romans 12:12 Paul said, “Be joyful in hope.” He said that one of the fruit of the Spirit, one of the invariable results of living in the Spirit of Christ, is joy. It is a mark of the Spirit filled life. If you’re not joyful, you are not filled by the Spirit. In 1 Thessalonians 5:16 he said it again, “Rejoice always.”

Why does God want us to have joy?

**Because it honors him**.

A couple of weeks ago our granddaughters spent a night at our house. When Toby and Anna dropped them off they raced out of the car to our front door. They came in the house with a clamor and with big grins on their faces. They cried out, “Nana, Nana, can we play?” They were happy to be there, really happy. Their joy honored Nana. Their glee over being at our house said something good about Nana. Our joy over the presence of God in our lives says something good about him.

Think back to your wedding. What kind of expression was on the face of that person you were marrying that day? Or perhaps I should ask, “What kind of expression did you want to be on the person you were marrying?” I’ll give you three options. The first option is an expression of sadness and resignation like that on the face of a rambunctious kid who has to go to the principal’s office. The second option is a ho-hum expression like this is just another day on the job, like every other day. The third option is one of boundless joy, of such happiness that it cannot be contained. Which of those did you hope you would see on the face of your intended that day? I am certain it was option 3 because it says the person is gleeful over the prospect of being married to you. God is honored by our joy because it says we are gleeful over knowing him. Having him in our lives is the best thing we could imagine.

This is why having joy when things are hard is so important. If we only have joy when our circumstances are pleasant, aren’t we like everyone else? Aren’t most people joyful when they have joyful things happening in their lives? When we only have joy when life is working the way we want it to means that knowing God doesn’t make much difference. Yes, maybe knowing God is a good thing, but it’s not as important as our circumstances. It is rare and unexpected to have joy when what’s happening in our lives is hard, painful or disappointing. But if a person can have joy in those times, it makes a statement. It says knowing God makes the difference and that honors him.

**Because he loves us**

Laurie recently had a birthday. I wanted it to be special. I wanted to give a gift she would love and I wanted her to have a celebration that would make her feel honored. I wanted her to have a happy birthday. Not just the greeting card cliché happy birthday, but I wanted her to be filled with joy. It makes me happy to see her full of joy with a huge smile on her face. Isn’t that something we all want for those we love? Should it surprise us then that God, who loves us, would want that for us as well? Of course he wants us to be joyful, because joy is so much better than any alternative.

**Because without it, we pursue it in wrong places**

The French mathematician and philosopher, Blaise Pascal, said, “All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end.” Everything we do is, in the end aimed at bringing us happiness, or joy.

We seek joy, one way or another. If we don’t have it, we will try anything to get it. Unfortunately, if we don’t get it from God, then we will seek to find it somewhere else. The somewhere else can be a problem. Often the ways we seek to find joy have destructive elements in them. They have a negative impact on us or on others, or both. At best, they can never give us what we are seeking. They might give us a brief burst of joy that fades relatively quickly, and it can be erased by a vast array of negatives, sometimes even trivial ones. In other words, trying to find joy in the ways we look for it will prove to be a futile waste of time.

Thomas Aquinas said, “Man cannot live without joy, therefore when he is deprived of true spiritual joy it is necessary that he become addicted to carnal pleasures.” C. S. Lewis said, “I sometimes wonder whether all pleasures are substitutes for joy.” God loves us and doesn’t want us to harm ourselves or others, nor does he want us to waste our lives in the search for joy in places that can never provide what we seek. This is part of why he wants us to experience joy.

HOW CAN WE HAVE MORE JOY?

**Believe**

Verse 8 says about Jesus, “you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy. The joy is a result of believing in Jesus. This is reminiscent of what Jesus said in John 7:38, “Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

Believing in Jesus will have that effect. When we keep believing in him on a continual basis, the result will be joy. This is like Galatians 5:22 saying the fruit of the Spirit is joy. We experience the Spirit by believing in Jesus at all times. I recently had an unpleasant experience. I woke up in the morning and out of the blue I was experiencing vertigo. Standing up, walking, just turning my head caused things to spin around me. I had no warning and no other symptoms. It just came on me. I hate that feeling. It made me feel lousy and it made me exhausted. When I feel bad like that I tend to kind of collapse in on myself. I feel kind of sorry for myself, I don’t want to interact with anyone, I am definitely not happy. But at one point I thought, can God really want me to have joy in this circumstance? But I feel bad and it’s a lousy circumstance. I don’t feel bubbly. But I chose to believe in Jesus. I chose to believe what he supplies is enough, even in this kind of situation. I don’t know if Laurie could tell, but it gave me a better frame of mind. It enabled me to think, “All right, Lord, if this is what you want for me today, then I’ll try to make the best of it. Please enable me to be a blessing to others.” I don’t know if the effect was noticeable, but I could feel it.

**Remember you have reason for joy**

In Deuteronomy 26:11 Moses told the people of Israel, “you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household.” I was talking not long ago with my son, Toby. He was discouraged because of the weird thing that is happening right now. I figured this is a great time to be a doctor because with the pandemic doctors are so badly needed. Much to my surprise it turns out not to be the case. I read an article recently that explained that doctors who are finishing their residency, like Toby is this year, are not finding jobs. The reason is that hospitals lost many millions of dollars due to the pandemic, so pretty much across the board they have put a freeze on hiring. Two years ago Toby would have gotten a huge signing bonus and big paying job when he was done with his residency. This year he can’t find a job, and he’s in much better shape than all the others of his class!

So he was bummed. But he can be joyful if he thinks about what God has given him. He has a wonderful wife and 3 beautiful children. He has an extended family who love him. He is healthy. He is unusually blessed with intelligence and ability. He has gotten through the long, arduous trek of med school then the grueling ordeal of residency. He owns a home in one of the most expensive places to live in the country. He has plenty of food to eat. He has the certain prospect that he will get a job and it will pay him well, it’s just a matter of time. I could go on at length. The point is, yes, there is a disappointing negative, but it is in the middle of a flood of tremendous good. God gives us good, and when we remember that, focus on the good he has given us and give thanks for it, the joy begins to fill our hearts.

Romans 12:12 says we should be joyful in hope. That is clearly an emphasis in 1 Peter 1. Do you see what Peter says about the hope we have? The prophets wanted to understand the reality of this hope. But it was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but us. In other words, we have something they longed to understand and experience first hand. Isaiah and Jeremiah would have loved to know what you know and have what you have. Even angels would love to know what you know. You have hope in a tragic world. What if this world was all you had? It would be so dark and discouraging. But you have hope, and that is huge reason to rejoice. In Luke 10:20 after his disciples had gotten excited about having the ability to toss demons out of people, Jesus said, “do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

If for no other reason, we should always be joyful because we have eternal life. Jesus said we should rejoice because of that. Just think of what it would be like if you didn’t have that hope. At best you’d hope you can have a pretty good life here and then you’d die, end of story. At worst, you could be looking at uncertainty and the possibility of everlasting darkness. That would be horrible. But you have the firm hope, the living hope, that this life is just the prelude, that what awaits you, as we have seen, is truly spectacular.

Joy is always a response to something. We have joy because of something that has happened or has been given to us. Think of the greatest bursts of joy in your life. They came because of what you’ve been given. You have God’s love and acceptance and eternal life in Christ? What compares to it?

Another reason we have for joy is that God reigns. 1 Chronicles 16:31 says, “let the heavens rejoice…let them say among the nations, ‘The Lord reigns.’” Our hope in this world is in the fact that God reigns. God is sovereign. No matter what people may do, no matter what may happen, this is where we can be at peace. God is in control, and we rejoice in that. Our hope is in the fact that God reigns. Whatever people do, God determines the direction of history.

For some reason not long ago I recalled a trip we took when our kids were young. We went to visit family in Seattle at Christmas on the train. I have a very clear memory of waking up in the middle of the night on that train. We were going through the mountains near the Oregon border. The landscape was covered in snow, but the train was plowing through it. Looking out the window I could see we were going around a long curve. I could see the engine with its lights lighting the track and the snow ahead, and I thought, there’s someone up there in that engine driving the train. I felt comforted by that thought. I was safe, there’s someone in charge making sure we safely get where we are going. It was a very happy feeling. That is how we can feel in life, because God is in charge making sure we get where we are going.

We also have cause to be joyful due to God’s presence. In Psalm 16:11 David wrote to God, “You will fill me with joy in your presence.” The fact that God is with us is a source of tremendous joy. Writer Sam Storms has said, “Joy is not necessarily the absence of suffering, but the presence of God.” Pierre Teilhard de Chardin said, “Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God.” He’s right. God is the source of joy. Where he goes he brings joy. Bishop Columba Marmion said, “Joy is the echo of God’s life in us.” If we have the Spirit of God in us giving us life, he will produce joy.

I get this. Laurie and I have joy being with our grandkids. We have joy being with our kids. Just being in their presence brings us joy. I have joy being with Laurie. One day this week I was working at home and Laurie was over at Toby and Anna’s because Anna wasn’t feeling well and needed help with the kids. I had a lot to do that day so I was busy, but in the middle of the afternoon she texted me to tell me she was coming home. Just getting that text made me feel a little happier. I wasn’t sad or down before that. It was just that having Laurie with me made life better and happier. We understand how the presence of a person can give us joy. The presence of God is like that, only better. His presence brings enormous joy.

Having God with us is an incredible blessing. The sovereign God, the source of all good and the source of joy, is with us. He loves us. When we are joyless we say that having God with us doesn’t make any difference at all, it doesn’t help. But when we live in his presence, we have reason to rejoice.

**Choose joy**

This is the part that we sometimes don’t like to hear, but need to. God *commands* us to be joyful. That means we can choose that. We will be as joyful as we choose to be. We doubt that sometimes, but there is some interesting research that has been done that points us in that direction. In 1988 Fritz Strack, a professor at the University of Wurzburg in Germany, published the results of a study he and colleagues had done. It was an unusual, but landmark study. In it they had 3 groups that they asked to look at some cartoons, then rate how funny they thought the cartoons were. One group was the control group that just looked at the cartoons. The other two groups they asked to hold a pen in their mouth while looking at the cartoons. One of the groups they asked to hold the pen with their lips, and the other they asked to hold it clinched between their teeth. The last group, the pen between their teeth group, rated the cartoons significantly funnier than either of the other two groups. What was the point of this? If you can envision it, you will see that holding a pen between your lips forces your facial expression into something of a frown. Holding it clinched between your teeth causes you to look like you are smiling. That was the difference! Just having something that looks like a smile on your face causes you to feel a little better, see the humor in the world.

In recent years there has been a movement in the social sciences to test landmark studies by seeing if their results can be replicated. About 5 years ago Strack’s study was put under scrutiny. It was repeated 17 different times by various groups, and none of them got his results. It seemed to definitively disprove his hypothesis. But Strack was asked about it, so he examined the recent studies. He noted that in all of the new studies a video camera was in the room with the subjects to document that the studies were performed rigorously. He claimed that the presence of a video camera changed the results. A group in Israel decided to test his hypothesis. They performed his test with a camera, and once again did not get his original results. Then they performed the test with a new group without a video camera present, and they got the exact results that Strack had gotten back in 1988! The video camera was the problem!

One thing that tells us is that self consciousness, represented by how aware we are of ourselves when a camera is running, absolutely skews our emotional state. The more self-conscious we are, the less joyful we will be. But the other thing this tells us is that our emotions, and particularly our capacity for joy, can be affected a lot more than we might think simply by the choices that we make.

We are all going to experience good and bad in life. We are going to have times that are wonderful, but also times of hardship and sadness. Again we must remember that life is less about what happens to us than it is about how we respond to what happens. How we think and what we choose has a huge effect on how our lives will go and even on how we feel.

Abraham Lincoln said, “Most folks are as happy as they make up their minds to be.” But long before anyone said anything like that, God had already told us we can and must choose joy.

We recently had an electrician install some new lights in our house and while he was at it he put in a new smoke and carbon monoxide detector. I know those are supposed to be life saving devices, but personally I believe they are actually demonic. A couple of days after the detector was installed with a brand new battery, it began loudly chirping and saying, “Battery low.” It repeated this annoying message about every 30 seconds. It made sense that this would happen. After all, it had been working for 3 whole days. Who expects a backup battery to last longer than that? I did battle with the thing and replaced the battery, and that seemed to pacify it. Just a few days later when our granddaughters were spending the night at our house, around 3:30 in the morning it did it again. Laurie and I scrambled around telling the thing to be quiet because we didn’t want it to wake up the kids, until we finally again replaced the battery and got it to shut up. It got worse. About a week later when once again the granddaughters were with us, it did it again early in the morning. Only this time it was more insistent. I hunted down my dad’s old shotgun and said, “I’ve had enough. I’m going to shut this thing up for good.” Laurie thought that maybe a shotgun blast right outside the girl’s bedrooms might be a tad unsettling for them, so I relented and put the gun away. But it did wake the girls up. We got a much earlier start on the day than we wanted. I could only quiet the satanic device by flipping the circuit breaker it was on and cutting off power to it. I was not a happy camper. But it hit me, God wants me to be joyful even in this. I said, “Okay, Lord. I’m going to choose to rejoice, even though this is really irritating.” An interesting thing happened. I began to have perspective on the thing. I decided the whole incident was pretty funny if you look at it the right way. I kind of clinched the pen between my teeth, and everything seemed to be a little less serious, and considerably more funny. I was reminded that God is right, we can choose joy, and when we do, life is better.

15th century mystic, Julian of Norwich, said, “The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything.” Do you wish to have joy? Live in God’s presence, in his love and grace. See that he is in everything that happens in your life. As you behold God in everything you will find fullness of joy.