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HOW GOD SWINGS A RACQUET  
2 Corinthians 7:3-7

There's an old story about a pastor who had been going through a rough time in his church. Every day it seemed like he got a barrage of incoming artillery rounds aimed at him. He felt way beyond unappreciated, more like abused and weary. He couldn't bear another discouraging Sunday, so he just decided he wasn't going to answer the bell that Sunday morning. He arranged to have someone fill in the pulpit for him, called a church leader and said he was too sick to show up that day. Then he indulged his favorite pastime. He went to play golf. He felt a little guilty, but mostly he was relieved to get away from all the criticism and do something he never got to do, play golf on Sunday morning. He came to a par 3 hole and hit one of the best drives he had ever hit. Straight and true it headed right for the pin. It landed just short of the green and rolled forward right into the hole. It was the first hole in one in his life.

In heaven the angels were appalled. They protested to the Lord, "How could you let that happen? He is shirking his duties in his ministry and lying to cover it up. Shouldn't he be punished for his actions instead of rewarded? Why did you let him make the best shot of his life?" The Lord calmly answered, "Who is he going to tell about it?" That silly joke highlights something we all know. Our triumphs don't mean much if we have no one to share them with. People are crucial to us, something we will see in 2 Corinthians 7:3-7. We will be reminded today of a truth that is essential to our ability to live as antifragile people.

PAUL HAD GREAT JOY DESPITE DIFFICULTY

You get a picture of the depth of the relationship Paul had with the Christians of Corinth in verse 3. He said that they had such a place in his heart that "we would live or die with you." What did he mean by that statement?

In 2 Samuel 15 David, the king of Israel, was caught by surprise when his own son, Absalom, launched a coup attempt against him. Absalom planned well and had his forces ready to fight, while David was totally unsuspecting. In verse 14 David tells his aides they have to flee Jerusalem or Absalom's forces would kill them all. There was a group of 600 Gittites led by a man named Ittai who wanted to go with David. These guys were from Gath, a Philistine city that had been an enemy of Israel for a long time. Yet this group of soldiers had chosen to side with David and be loyal to him, even though it meant turning on their own people.

David tells Ittai not to come. They were already exiles from their own country. David did not want to make them now wander around in the boonies with their very lives at risk. So he told Ittai to go back and said, “May kindness and faithfulness be with you.” But in verse 21 Ittai says to David, “As surely as the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be.”

Ittai was saying essentially, “We left our homeland to follow you. We are outcasts among our own people now because of our decision. But it is worth it to follow you. So wherever you go, no matter what it means, whether it means life or death, we’re going with you.” You have to love that, don’t you? What courage and what loyalty! That’s what Paul was saying to the Corinthians. We would live or die with you means, we are loyal to you and love you, and will not stop. Even if we had to die with you, we would.

That kind of loyalty and devotion strikes a chord deep within all of us. Many movies depict this longing for that kind of dedication in relationship. Back in 2004 it was *King Arthur*, a movie that purported to tell the true story of Arthur and depicted him as a Roman military leader. In the movie his men, given the option of being free, leaving and saving their lives, instead choose to stick with him even though it means almost certain death. We dream of that kind of loyalty. That’s why buddy movies have always been popular. For evidence see the *Lethal Weapon* movies, *Dumb and Dumber*, *Men In Black*, *Rush Hour* and others. This genre continues to be popular to this day as evidenced by this summer’s buddy movies *The Heat* and *Two Guns*. That is the sort of loyalty and devotion Paul had for the Corinthians.

Paul goes on to say, “I have great confidence in you; I take great pride in you. I am greatly encouraged; in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.” Literally he wrote that he was “filled with encouragement” because of them. His joy abounded. There was a Greek word for “abound” that Paul used here, but he tacked on the preposition “hyper” to it. In other words, he said despite all the hardship he was experiencing, and there was a plethora of it, his joy hyperabounded. He could hardly contain himself.

How many times in your life would you say your joy “hyperabounded”? The day I graduated from college I was so happy I couldn't contain myself. I was so glad to be done with school. No more papers, no more final exams, no more boring classes on such scintillating topics as French philosophers or numerical analysis. What a happy day. I was so joyful knowing I was done with all of that forever. Four years

later to my great surprise I was back in school again. However more joyful days were ahead. March 14, 1979 was an amazing day. It started off on a low with a broken heart over what I thought was a lost love, advanced to a dead battery in my car, then took a miraculous turn for the better when Laurie agreed to be my wife. I had never had that much joy in my life. Our wedding day, the days our kids were born, the days they graduated from college and the tuition bills stopped, their wedding days all were days of hyper abounding joy. But what is remarkable is that Paul said he overflowed with joy not on a great day but during painful hard times.

Who wouldn't want to be like that? Joy is so appealing. But imagine being under intense stress and facing hardships and threats to one's life and yet being not just joyful, but having joy without limit. That is powerful. That is what Paul claimed he experienced. He says in verse 5 that he was so stressed that "this body of ours had no rest, but we were harassed at every turn." It was in that kind of misery that Paul said his joy hyper abounded. In fact at the end of verse 7 he said his joy was greater than ever. I want to be like that. Don't you? **That is living the antifragile life.** All the hardship does is bring out joy in you. But where did that come from?

#### PAUL WAS ENCOURAGED BY GOD THROUGH PEOPLE

Why was Paul able to be so strong, so antrifragile? If I had the kind of circumstances he had, harassed at every turn, and someone said, "Why are you so down? Why are you so grumpy?" I would answer, "Well what do you expect. Look at what is happening in my life." Yet Paul was practically giddy with joy. The reason, he said in verse 6 was that **God comforted him**. Back in chapter 1 we looked at the fact that God comforts. We learned that this is crucial to being antifragile. Paul's joy wasn't because he was just a naturally up kind of guy but because God made a difference in his life and his situation. God acted. **His joy was due to what God did.**

But key here is to ask how did God comfort Paul? People were central to God's work. God used human beings to cause Paul's experience of joy. A big element was the arrival of his pal Titus. Verse 6 says that God comforted Paul "by the coming of Titus. Just having Titus with him made a huge difference. But another contributor to his joy was the Corinthians. The fact that they asked Titus to tell Paul that they still loved him and wanted to stay in relationship with him was a source of overflowing joy.

This surprises me because I would not think of the Corinthians as a source of joy. Dismay, frustration, annoyance, even disgust, yes, but not joy. They were proud and arrogant, they thought they were better than Paul and many among them were

quite critical of him. They were fighting among themselves, they were getting drunk at communion, they were suing each other, they were confused about some essential doctrines, and they were competing to prove which of them was the most "spiritual." These are not exactly endearing qualities. Yet Paul loved those people, warts and all, and because he cared about them so when he learned that things were good in his relationship with them he had joy that was bigger than any of his troubles.

That people were crucial contributors to Paul's joy should surprise no one. In his book, *The Social Animal*, writer David Brooks made the point that humans are designed to live in community with others. We draw strength and joy from people. He cited studies by Robert Provine at the University of Maryland who found that people are 30 times more likely to laugh when with other people than they are when alone. He also discovered that when they examined the sentences that provoked laughter only 15% of them were funny in any discernible way. Instead the laughter seemed to stem from just being together.

John Cacioppo, the director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago is considered the world's leading expert on loneliness. In his book on loneliness he said that when they drew blood of their subjects who were alone and dealing with loneliness they found that loneliness actually was affecting their cells. Being alone affects us even down to the cellular level.

John would write in 3 John 4, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." There is a principle that we all know and have all experienced, but sometimes forget. And that is that God works through people. He uses people to comfort, encourage and be a source of joy for us. It is not the only way that he works but it is one of the major ones. When God set about accomplishing his plan of grace to rescue the world he chose to use a people group, the Jewish people, to accomplish it. He used a real life man and a real life woman named Abraham and Sarah to start the race. When God wanted to put a stop to boasting and threatening by an overgrown Philistine named Goliath he used a humble shepherd boy named David to do it. Years later when he wanted to confront that same David, now the king of Israel, with his sin of adultery and conspiracy to commit murder he used a man named Nathan to do it. Even God's greatest act of redemption, the rescue of the human race, required a real human being named Jesus to accomplish. When he wanted to announce the good news of Jesus Christ to the world he used people like Peter, John, Philip and Paul to do it. Do you see the theme here?

We all understand this concept. I am not just my body. I even differentiate at times between me and my own body when I say things like "my old body is letting me down these days." Yet in this world when I want to accomplish something I do it through my body. I recently played tennis with my son, Toby. He hit the ball over the net onto my side. To play the game I had to hit the ball back over the net. To accomplish that I did not simply think it into occurring. I didn't use the Think System as devised by Professor Harold Higgins in *The Music Man*. Unlike sci fi movies where people have telekinetic powers to move physical objects merely with mental power, I had to apply physical force to the ball to propel it back over the net. My brain ordered my hand to grip the racquet, then told my arm to swing the racquet at the appropriate time and location so that it properly impacted the ball, propelling over the net...and over the back line of the court so I lost the point. But you get the idea. The mysterious, "I," Rick Myatt, some ill defined consciousness, had to use a body to accomplish something in this physical world.

God is a mysterious spiritual being beyond our ability to physically sense and completely understand. He has unlimited power that is so great and so effective all he had to do was order something to happen and it did. He said let there be light and there was light. At times he has delivered messages to people with no human agency, such as when a mysterious hand suddenly appeared writing on a wall the message of coming judgment on a Persian king. He parted a sea to rescue his own people. Had he chosen to do so he could have had Goliath drop dead in the middle of one of his taunts with no human involvement whatsoever. He has that power and at times has exercised it. If he wants to comfort and strengthen someone he has the ability to just say "be comforted and strong" and that person would feel better and be suddenly strong.

God operates that way continually. He decides to sustain life for another day, he orders that to happen and we continue to live. Should he not use his power and his order to continue life on this planet at any moment it would cease to exist. So in an infinity of ways God is continually using his invisible power without any other agency of being involved. Yet he does an unusual thing. Much of the time the way he accomplishes things in this physical world is through people, especially through his body, which the Bible tells us is those who believe in his Son, Jesus. 1 Corinthians 12:27 says to Christians "Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it." Ephesians 5:23 says, "Christ is the head of the church, his body." We are the body he uses in this world.

There's the old joke about the atheist who is stranded on his roof during a flood and who decides he is going to put the God thing to a real life test. He says, "If you are

real God, then you rescue me from this flood." Almost immediately some people show up in a boat and offer to save him, but he declines because he wants to see if God will show up. The water continues to rise and another boat shows up. Again he declines. Later as the water is threatening to inundate him a helicopter shows up. Still he refuses. Eventually the water rises all the way over his house and he drowns. He is stunned to find himself in the presence of the Almighty God he was sure did not exist. He whines to God, "I told you if you were real I wanted you to prove yourself by saving me. Why didn't you do that?" God answers, "I sent you two boats and a helicopter. What more do you want?"

Why does God choose to operate that way? Why does he so often use human beings as his agents instead of directly intervening in our lives? Any time you start a question "why does God..." the answer is "I don't know." God doesn't always explain himself to us nor could he fully for his ways are beyond us. But one thing we can know about his reasons is that the motivation is love. I suspect that in his love he wants us to feel like we have a meaningful place in this world so he uses us to impact other people, he uses us to bring them joy. Another is that in his love he wants to create unity, so he uses us to bring joy and bond people together.

When God seeks to bring joy into our lives one of the primary ways he does so is through people. He gives us relationships with others that are some of the biggest sources of joy we will ever experience. Laurie and I recently went to the Disneyland Resort. That evening we were given priority seating to watch the Fantasmic Show. The priority seating thing is a story for another time, but we were instructed to tell the Disney employee that we had the VIP seating under the name Donald Duck. As we entered the VIP area we weren't real sure where we were supposed to sit. We encountered a young man in a similar situation. We struck up a conversation with him and learned that he was at Disneyland all alone. He had planned to go with some friends but that plan had fallen through. As we talked it appeared to me that he was a lonely fellow who was trying to hide the hurt of being alone. He made a valiant effort to put a good face on the fact that he was all by himself and make it seem like he was having a great time at Disneyland. But it quickly became obvious that he was desperate for someone to talk to and share his experience of the day with. Disneyland may be the Happiest Place On Earth, but it was painfully obvious that it's not all that happy if you're there alone. We all have experienced joy when we are by ourselves, but we also know that in the end joy to be complete must be shared. We need people to experience joy. So God brings us joy and encouragement through people.

That is why God places his children in the Body of Christ. To be antifragile we need joy, and we often get that through people. We all know that it is possible to experience joy in the midst of difficulty because of people. Laurie and I have been watching a television show called *Falling Skies* that is produced by Steven Spielberg. It is a science fiction story of aliens invading the earth and trying to wipe out the human race. It is a story of war, of fighting for existence. There is a scene that has occurred in varying forms several times in the show and occurred again in a recent episode. The scene is of intense struggle, of combat against overwhelming odds, of times of hardship and pain. But the worst of it is when the central character's loved ones are in grave peril and even seemingly have been killed. Yet in the scene the loved ones somehow have escaped death and show up alive in the end. There is great joy and relief. There is hope. The situation hasn't changed. Life is still hard and hope is still dim, yet there is strength and joy because of people. We don't see such scenes and think, "that's dumb. That would never happen." Instead we think, "Yes, that is exactly right." We know that is how life is. If the people we love are with us and are well then somehow things will be okay in the end. People bring the joy and hope.

### IMPLICATIONS

#### HOW DOES GOD USE PEOPLE TO COMFORT US?

He uses them to fill our lives. Yes, sometimes he fills them with complications because of the people in our lives and we end up thinking we'd be a lot better off just going and living alone on an island somewhere. But we all know that is not true. Do you remember the movie *Castaway*? Tom Hanks played a man who survives a plane crash only to find himself alone on an island in the south Pacific. He finds water to drink and food to eat, but in the end, he is alone. He creates a "friend" out of a volleyball he names Wilson, but that is not enough. In some ways his situation is great. He has what he needs to survive and he is living in a beautiful place, the kind of place people like to go to for vacations, but he is alone, and that is unbearable. He cannot live without other people. He risks his life by building a raft and launching off into the unknown ocean. He concluded it would be better to die than to be alone.

That is a powerful statement about our need for other people and about the deadliness of isolation. Life is ultimately empty without people to love and be devoted to. We get joy and fullness of life from people. People fill our lives. That is why the Body of Christ, the church, is such an incredible gift from God. It can and should be a source of great joy and life for us, just as it was for Paul.

People can give us strength. Proverbs 27:17 is familiar to many. It says, "As iron sharpens iron so one man sharpens another." The two pieces of iron together make something that is sharper, more effective than the one alone.

In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell discussed people who are exceptional in their fields, the "outliers," the few way out on the tail of the bell curve who are few and far between, people like Robert Oppenheimer, Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, Paul Allen and others. One of his main points is that such people do not develop in isolation. He cites the case of Christopher Langan. This man is a genius, with an IQ well beyond that of Albert Einstein. He could ace a test on any foreign language merely by skimming the text book for a few minutes before the test. He fell asleep while taking the SAT but still got a perfect score. But you've likely never heard of him. He has no impressive achievements. He works on a horse farm in Missouri. The reason is he did not have a community to help him develop and employ his gifts. Gladwell says he "had to make his way alone, and no one, not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses, ever makes it alone."

People can lighten our load. Galatians 6:2 says, "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." Though we frequently try to go it alone because it seems easier, just having other people pitch in to help us with our burden, whatever it may be, makes it easier to bear.

Just about 10 days ago I got to do one of my least favorite activities again. I got to help a relative move. I have developed a new theory about eternal punishment. It is about moving someone and having to do the work all by yourself. And no matter how much you move, the pile of furniture and boxes never gets any smaller. That truly is hell. I pitched to my brother Jerry the idea that he should hire movers, but he opted for cheap labor, including yours truly. When they opened the back of the Uhaul truck I groaned. I had envisioned a smaller pile. Jerry, his friend, Dave, and I started the work. Then Toby came. Laurie did too, and Annie and my Mom were also there. Having a lot of people around just made the thing go so much faster and seem a lot less difficult.

#### HOW CAN WE HAVE COMMUNITY?

Yes, we want that joy and strengthening from our friends, but how do we have that kind of community? One option is to buy them on social media sites. For a mere \$10 FanMeNow will find you 1,000 Twitter followers. For \$1750 they'll get you a million followers. You can buy 30,000 views for your YouTube video for \$150 from a site called 500views.com. For \$3100 they'll send your video viral by



getting you a million views. According to an article in *Hemispheres* magazine, “no matter what social network you’re on, you can buy your way to popularity.” But we need something more real than that, so how do we get it?

***Major on giving rather than receiving***

Our problem is that we all want to have friends who will share our burdens, be there to strengthen and encourage us and fill us with joy. We want friends and loved ones who will be loyal and devoted to us the way Paul was to the Corinthians. So we try to get other people to be that kind of friend for us and we feel sorry for ourselves when they disappoint us.

In Acts 20:35 Paul quoted Jesus himself saying, “it is more blessed to give than to receive.” When I was young I didn’t think that. Christmas was about the great gifts I would get. Oddly today while I enjoy the gifts that my loved ones give me, the thing that really gives me joy is when I get to buy something for them that they really love.

That principle is what we need to put to work in our relationships. We are to make them about giving, not receiving. In other words, our focus is not to be on having friends but on being a friend. When we focus on wanting others to be our friend what do we end up with? Usually a pity party. They don’t measure up to what we want and hope for, and so we subtly try to manipulate them to give us what we want, but it fails and we decide we got a raw deal. We feel lonely and sorry for ourselves. I cannot say this strongly enough, so I will repeat it. When we focus on ourselves and what we want to receive in relationships we will not get joy. We will damage the people around us, ruin our relationships and end up with disappointment, frustration, loneliness, self pity and bitterness.

In John 15:15 not long before his arrest and execution, Jesus said to his disciples, “I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends.” Can you imagine that? The Lord of all, the President of Everything, said to these guys, “You are my buds, my homies, my friends.” Were they his friends because they had done so much for him and given him so much? No, they were his friends mostly because of what he did for them and they simply responded. That is the model for us. Our role is to be like Jesus, to care for them and simply let them respond.

***Grace them***

Did Jesus call his disciples his friends because they were exactly what a friend should be? Definitely not. That very night he had already told them they would all

abandon him at the worst moment of his life and Peter would repeatedly deny he even knew Jesus. Epic friendship fail.

Yet Jesus didn't even blink. He didn't stutter or provide lots of caveats when he called them his friends. He knew exactly what he was getting, disappointment and all, and he rejoiced in it. You see the same thing in the passage we're studying. The Corinthians were, as I said, a total mess. Our friends are going to make messes. It's what we humans do on a pretty regular basis. And we are all dying to be loved anyway and given grace. That is how we must relate to our friends

### ***Make the effort***

It is a very simple principle. If it is important it is worth working hard at. It is a matter of saying we will do this and pay whatever price is necessary to pursue love of others. It is always easier to just be occupied with our own lives. But when we do that we lose joy and become more fragile.

I mentioned that Jerry chose not to hire movers. One of the reasons for that was the urging of a friend. One of the guys on his staff, a friend, told him he could save a lot of money by doing it himself. That, however, meant a long drive from Seattle to the San Diego area in a truck. Jerry feared that would be a disaster for his bad back. Not to worry. His friend told him he would do it for him. So his friend helped him load his stuff into the truck, then drove the 1200 miles down here, helped him unload his stuff at this end, then flew home.

That is a friend. Proverbs 18:24 says, "one who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." Jerry's brother didn't volunteer to drive that truck 1200 miles for him. But he had a friend who did.

We want to ask "who would do that for me?" That is the wrong question. The right question is, "Who will you do that for?" Who can count on you to make the effort to be the kind of friend who is closer than a brother?

In the end the most important part of being a friend is simply choosing to step out of the rut of your self-preoccupied life, to say no to the busy schedule filled with "me stuff," and choose to make other people enough of a priority that you take time to know them and care about them. It can be difficult at times and likely will complicate life. But in the end the relationships that we build will be the very thing God uses to encourage us, console us, strengthen us and give us joy.