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THE SERIOUS BUSINESS OF HEAVEN

In the movie *Ice Age: Continental Drift* the main characters are Manny, a woolly mammoth, Sid the sloth and Diego, the saber tooth tiger. As they seek to survive disaster that sets the continent adrift they are pursued by pirates. While that is going on there are two other characters, Crash and Eddie, a couple of shallow possums, who are too busy having fun to worry about the world's big problems. In one scene the two of them are perched in a tree as a mountain is about to collapse against the tree. They are hoping they'll be catapulted through the air when that happens. Eddie says to Crash, "Wait for it...wait for it." Then they are indeed flung into the air laughing. They crash land on their faces at the feet of Louis, a mole hog. Eddie exults "that was awesome!" as they leap to their feet.

A disgusted Louis asks, "Can I ask you guys something? How are you both so happy? Doesn't it bother you that the world may be ending?" Eddie asks Crash, "Can I tell him our secret?" Crash agrees that he can so Eddie motions Louis to come close and says, "Come here, come here." As Louis leans close Eddie shares their secret for being so happy while the fate of the world is in the balance. "We're very, very stupid." Louis is stunned, but finally says, "But still, you're not even a teensy bit concerned about, oh I don't know, say, imminent death?" Eddie just reaches up, pinches Louis's nose and says, "Beep."

I don't recommend being very stupid as the key to a happy life. Blithely closing one's eyes to the problems of the world is not a real helpful approach. This world is broken and there is more pain and hardship in it than one can ever catalog. Yet I find myself drawn to the idea of being joyful and carefree like Crash and Eddie even in the midst of it. Today I want us to think about something that can move us in that direction. This is not about being as empty-headed as they were but is about being people full of joy and hope in all situations. I want to help you have a closer experience of God, have more joy, improve your mental outlook, and become a blessing to other people. Here's one thing you can do to make that happen.

GOD IS ALL ABOUT JOY

God Himself Is Full Of Joy

In his book, *Secrets In The Dark* (p. 239-240), the late Frederick Buechner wrote that at the heart of creation there is joy. C. S. Lewis said the same thing. He said,

“Joy is the serious business of heaven.” This is because God is full of joy. In his book, *Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard wrote, “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.” He went on to write that God is “the most joyous being in the universe.”

Job 38:7 says that when he laid the foundation of the earth, “the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy.” In Nehemiah 8:10 Nehemiah told the people of Israel, “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” How can that be true unless the Lord has joy? In John 15:11 Jesus explained to the disciples why he was giving them instruction. “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” He wanted his joy, the kind of joy that he possessed to be in them. If that joy was in them it would be complete because his joy is complete. Jesus is completely joyful! Romans 14:17 says the kingdom of God is of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is all about joy.

That God would be joyful makes sense. James 1:17 says that every good gift comes from God. Joy is good, therefore it comes from God. Every bit of joy that exists comes from God. Consider all the joy of all the humans who have ever lived. How much joy is that? There is no way to measure that. All of it came from God. He is the source of joy.

God is not Santa Claus, a right jolly old elf. But he is full of joy. I suspect that most of us don't think of him that way. But he has every reason to be full of joy. He is full of love, and that is a key element to joy. He is not stressed. He has the power to deal with all that happens and he knows that this whole mess is going to turn out well. What limits our joy? Fear, anxiety, disappointment, dissatisfaction. God has no fear, he is not worried about future, his plan is working just fine so he is not dissatisfied. He has every reason to be joyful. But beyond that joy is part of his character. It is who he is.

God wants us to be joyful

The great thing is that God wants to share his joy. We just saw that Jesus wanted his disciples, including us, to have his unlimited joy. He wants us to have joy that is complete. This is his will for us. It only makes sense. Remember that God wants us to be transformed into the image of his Son. He wants us to be like him. If we are going to be like him then we, too, will be the most joyful of people. Our joy accurately reflects who he is. It honors him and brings him pleasure.

It is also a characteristic of joy that to be full it must be shared. While we were on vacation Laurie and I were staying in a nice hotel at one point, but our room had an unfortunate feature. It had a door to the room next to us so a family could have adjoining rooms. However sound came right through that door so we could hear the people in the room next to us all too well. One evening we heard the gentleman in that room as clearly as if he were in our room. He said, “Dang, my darn zipper is down. I guess it’s been down all night.” Had I heard that and been by myself I would have thought it was kind of funny. But Laurie and I looked at each other and burst out laughing. There was more joy because we shared it. Had I been alone and had the funny moment my first thought would have been “I’ve got to tell Laurie about this one.” Joy is completed when shared.

I am not a Facebook person, but Laurie is. She often shows me things that she encounters on Facebook. When people have something joyful happen they want to post it on their page and share it. And they want other people to “Like” it. That’s because it is the nature of joy to be shared, and to actually increase in the sharing. That’s part of why God wants us to be joyful. It is the character of joy to be shared.

Galatians 5:22 speaks of the fruit of the Spirit, the certain results of the Spirit of Jesus being in us. What are they? “Love, joy, peace” are the first three. The Spirit of Jesus will produce joy in us. Romans 12:12 commands us to “be joyful in hope.” 1 Thessalonians 5:16 commands us “be joyful always.”

Joy certainly can be an emotion, a response to a happy event, but as God has it joy is more than that. It is actually a quality of his character. And that is the kind of joy he longs for us to have. He wants us to have joyful character. That doesn’t mean we will be giddy all the time. Rather, it means at the core of who we are there is peace, there is confidence, there is trust and there is a satisfaction and happiness with what God gives us. It is a quality that is so confident in God and feels so blessed in him and by him that it overshadows the ups and downs of life.

This joy is not impossible for us! God offers his joy to us and commands us to be joyful ***because joy is available to us right now***. So how are we going to have that? The answer to that is to live by the Spirit of Jesus. As we let him rule our lives his character including joy will come out. But there is something we can do that actually will increase our experience of his joy.

GIVING THANKS IS CRUCIAL FOR JOY

In 1 Thessalonians 5:18 the Lord commands us to give thanks in all circumstances. Ephesians 5:20 commands us to be “always giving thanks to God the Father for

everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Why does he command us to give thanks always? Is he picky about etiquette or does he have some need to be acknowledged for the good he does? No, God has powerful reasons for commanding us to give thanks. Romans 1:18-22 says all the problems of the human race begin when they refuse to give thanks to God. Giving thanks rightly relates us to God, and failing to give thanks puts us in a wrong relation to God.

Another reason we should give thanks is that it is essential to our spiritual and emotional health. If we are not giving thanks we are saying we are dissatisfied with what we have. If we are dissatisfied there will be no peace and no joy.

Robert Emmons, professor of psychology at UC Davis collaborated on a study with Michael McCullough, psych prof at the University of Miami. They took three groups of volunteers and randomly assigned them to focus on one of three things each week. One group focused on the hassles they experienced, one just on everyday events and the third on things for which they were grateful. The researchers discovered that the third group, the one that focused on being grateful ended up being happier. They even were healthier and more active than the other two groups. They concluded that practicing gratitude makes people happy.

In November of 2010 *The Wall Street Journal* published an article by Melinda Beck that discussed the positive effects of giving thanks. It said research now shows it has a number of healthy impacts. "Adults who frequently feel grateful have more energy, more optimism, more social connections and more happiness than those who do not. They're also less likely to be depressed, envious, greedy or alcoholics. They earn more money, sleep more soundly, exercise more regularly and have greater resistance to viral infections."

The flip side of that coin is obvious to us all. An ungrateful person will be far from joyful. I remember seeing a family about to enter a restaurant that Laurie and I love. Grandparents, parents, and three kids were in this group, but one of them was not grateful for the chance to eat there. The little 4 year old boy didn't want to go in that restaurant for some reason and he threw a fit. It was a tantrum for the ages. It intimidated the parents and grandparents. They didn't know what to do. The whole ugly scene played out right at the front door of the restaurant. I'll ask you, do you suppose there was any joy in that boy? Was there any joy anywhere in that group? When we decide we don't want what we've been given when we are ungrateful, there will be no joy anywhere present.

Biblical scholar P. T. O'Brien wrote that thanksgiving is almost a synonym for the Christian life. A Christian is a grateful person because his whole life is founded on and revolves around the truth that he has been given the greatest gift he could ever have and he does not deserve that gift.

Paul is a great example. Read the book of Philippians and you will see joy oozing out of every pore of it. This was a letter written while he was in chains. He had been for several years. He was horribly wronged, his freedom was taken from him and he was being kept from doing that which he felt he was on earth to do. He faced the very real possibility that an unjust Nero might well take his life. And he said even if that happened he rejoiced.

Paul continually gave thanks. Nearly all of his letters begin with giving thanks. Read 1 Corinthians 1:4. The Corinthians were a migraine headache looking for a way to happen. They were arrogant, bickering, critical of Paul, indulgent and selfish. Yet Paul wrote, "I always thank God for you."

Paul trained himself to remember and see God's blessings. For him the glass was not half full or half empty, it was always full of God's wisdom, goodness, love and blessing. He wasn't entitled, believing he deserved better. He knew that he deserved judgment, so anything other than that was a gift to be given thanks for. Giving thanks is actually a spiritual discipline, a choice we make that leads to the life and character we want.

WE HAVE MUCH TO GIVE THANKS FOR

The thorns of life

When it comes to giving thanks I typically start thinking of the good things that have happened. We've had a lot of them in our lives this year. Carissa and Michael got married, Toby did really well on the MCAT test, Michael survived a deployment to Afghanistan without harm, Toby has now been accepted to two medical schools. Those are good things to give thanks for. We should ever be grateful for them.

But sometimes we forget to give thanks to God for the good he brings out of the difficult things of life. We all know that we only grow and become stronger through being pushed and stressed. We understand that in the physical sense, but our character, our soul, our walk with God also only being better and stronger through encountering thorns.

Let me remind you of a few biblical examples of God using terrible trials to create something good. In his familiar story Joseph was betrayed and sold as a slave by his own brothers. Later he was falsely accused of a crime and unjustly thrown in prison. How do you suppose that felt to him? It must have been galling, painful beyond words. He likely had little hope. Yet those painful events were the very steps he had to take to get to just the right place where God would use him not only to save Egypt, but his own family.

David was totally loyal to Saul, yet in his insane jealousy Saul tried to kill him. He pursued him relentlessly as though David were his greatest enemy. Poor David spent years in humiliation and hardship, being hunted by the king of his own people, living among enemies, pretending to be crazy to stay safe, hiding out in caves. What came of all of that? A series of poems that we call the Psalms, some of the greatest and most comforting words ever inked onto paper. Those words are the lifelines we hold tightly to 3000 years later.

Jesus Christ was rejected, mocked, tortured and executed on a cross. Is there anything worse than that? Yet God used that very horror to accomplish the greatest good in the history of creation. The pattern is there everywhere we look. We must never forget the good that God has brought about in our lives through the hardships, losses and disappointments we all inevitably experience. As I think back over my life I can see clearly that the most difficult, the most painful events in my life were the things that God used to work most powerfully in me. We must never forget to give thanks for the good that God works in our lives through the thorns that are an inevitable part of life in this world.

The wonders of life

Have you ever tried to write a song? I have. The result was just awful. It was so bad it was downright laughable. I am glad it was never recorded or written down so there is now no evidence that it ever existed. I can't tell you anything about it today. I have no memory of its words or tune, possibly because I wanted to forget it ever existed. I have no song writing ability whatsoever.

What if everyone in the world was like me? Our lives would be so much emptier if no one could write music. Music brings so much color, so much beauty, so much emotion into our world. While we were on vacation one night Laurie and I were walking along a street doing some shopping. We went by a restaurant that had a guy providing live music, playing his guitar and singing. The restaurant didn't have any walls so his music could be clearly heard on the street. As we walked by he was singing the Kenny Loggins classic *Danny's Song*. I'll bet you know it.

“Even though we ain’t got money, I’m so in love with you, honey.” Every person we passed on the street was singing along with him and knew those words.

How cool is it that there are people who can write songs so memorable that they stick in your head more than 40 years after they were written? How much richer are lives are because of such things, yet how often do we give thanks for them?

I’m not saying you need to give thanks for that song, but do you in wonder give thanks to God for how your life is enriched by music? Perhaps it is some great hymn or some terrific contemporary worship song like *Blessed Be Your Name*, *Lead Me To The Cross*, *Desert Song*, *How Great Is Our God*, *Inside Out* and so many others.

There are so many wonders in this world that bless our lives such as the beauty all around us, the marvel of our own bodies and how they function, the spectacular abilities of other people to bless us. These are all manifestations of God’s grace to us that we should continually praise him for. How much money is a spectacular sunset worth, or a brilliant blue sky on a summer day? There is no price tag on such things. You cannot buy them. We receive them as gifts, and as such we should bless God for them no matter what else may happen.

The Hope of Life

The Buddha said that suffering is the undercurrent and bedrock of life. It is not just that sad and sorrowful things sometimes happen but that at the heart of life is sadness itself. There is truth in this, for we all know that all good things will be lost. We cannot hold onto the things we love and enjoy for they inevitably change and melt away. People try to get away from this sadness. They try to escape it by amusing themselves or anesthetizing themselves. They try to bury it or ignore it by being insanely busy. Many get trapped by it.

Author and former pastor John Piper told of going back to visit his father in his old home town. John’s mother died in a bus accident in 1974. His father later remarried and was married to his second wife for 25 years. The occasion of this visit was that his step mother had to be moved to a nursing home. She would never return to their home. Piper describes standing on the back porch of that house reflecting on the loss of his mother, the status of his step mother and the fact that at some point not too far down the road he will return to that house to bury his father. After that he would never go back to that house. Piper said, “The question rose in my heart – almost like a cry of rebellion—Lord, is this all that life is, the

accumulation of memories? The closing of one chapter after another...the closing of every chapter becomes more and more painful. Is that all there is?"

Without Christ yes, that's all there is. But in Christ it is not all there is. In Christ there is hope. There is hope that we will be restored, that all of creation will be restored. There is hope that we will live eternally only not with the pain and inevitable sadness of this life. We will live renewed, free of decay, free of fear, full of joy in Christ. We will see our loved ones again.

No matter what else may be going on in our lives we have hope. We have reason to give thanks to God because he has given us a gift that we did not reserve and this gift is immeasurably more important and more valuable than anything else in our lives. Jesus talked about the man who finds a pearl, a gem, of greater value than everything else he has. This hope is the pearl. If you don't have it, no matter what you have in this world you have nothing but sadness. But if you have this you have the most valuable possession you could ever own. If for no other reason every day of our lives we should be thanking God for this gift, for it is the most precious gift we could ever be given.