

April 27, 2014  
©Rick Myatt

THAT TANTALIZING SUCKER  
John 16:22

Laurie and I took care of Toby and Anna's dogs, Doc and Banjo, yesterday. It is always quite an event when they come to our house. Toby and Anna tell us they recognize the streets near our house and as they get near the dogs start whining. They are anxious to get there. When they arrive pandemonium breaks out. They jump up and down and run all around, so excited they don't know what to do with themselves. The word that comes into my mind is exuberance. We talk about joy as Christians, but so often I fear we drain it of its real meaning. I see lots of Christians claiming to know Jesus, be filled with the Spirit of Christ, but sure don't look very joyful, myself included at times. I think we should replace the word "joy" in our minds with the word "exuberance." How many people do you know who live exuberantly?

Pastor Adrian Rogers says joy is the birthright of the child of God. I would amend that to "exuberance" is our birthright. Our God is a God of joy. Romans 14:17 says His kingdom is about joy. It is about exuberance. We saw in John 15 that God wants us to not only have joy but to have total joy, which seems to me a good description of exuberance. There we learned that joy comes from having Jesus as Lord and having him as Friend. To the degree that we allow Jesus to be Lord in our lives and walk with him as our Friend who loves us, we will experience joy.

So you're saying Doc and Banjo are the model for Christian living? Uh, no, most definitely not. But their exuberance is. This verse that we are looking at today caught my attention as I was studying this chapter. It has some more to say to us about joy, and about how we can be more exuberant.

First we should be aware of the fact that:

**THERE ARE SOME WHO WANT TO TAKE AWAY JOY**

In verse 22 Jesus spoke of his coming death and resurrection when he said, "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." Note that expression, "no one will take away your joy." That assumes that someone might try to take away joy. This is a reality that we need to come to grips with. There are those who would like to see to it that you and I have no joy whatsoever. Public Enemy Number One on that list is Satan.

God is the most joyful of all beings. He is the source of all joy. Satan hates all things God. Satan is so embittered toward God that he has become full of hate and

darkness. There is nothing good in him, only spite and anger. Because joy is so characteristic of God Satan despises it. Have you ever had sunblock on your face and then been outside in the sun exercising, playing a game or working hard? You sweat and the sweat runs down your face into your eyes carrying some of the sunblock with it. Have you ever had that happen? When it does it stings like crazy. It makes your eyes water it hurts so much. That's a little like the effect joy has on Satan. Actually the effect is a little more like the effect Montezuma's Revenge has on us. It makes him violently ill. To sum up, I like cilantro a lot more than Satan likes joy.

Satan wants to destroy true joy. One of his favorite ploys is to try to replace the real thing with a cheap fake that ends up bringing only disappointment and remorse. If he can get us to think that the temporary surge of pleasure we get from some of the blessings of this world is all there is, if he can get us to live in constant pursuit of those brief jolts of temporal joy, he can actually blind us to the reality that what we need is something deeper and more permanent.

The Greek myth of Tantalus is a good reminder for us. Tantalus is punished by the gods for his misdeeds. He is forced to stand in a pool of water under a fruit tree. He is hungry, so he reaches up for the fruit, but every time he does the branches pull back from him and he can't get the fruit. He becomes thirsty so he tries to drink from the pool, but when he does the water recedes. He is doomed to live forever hungering and thirsting, and never able to slake either desire. This is the origin of our word "tantalize." Satan tantalizes us, dangling what appear to be the sources of joy but even if we get the things we reach for the joy remains always just out of reach. When we fall for Satan's ploy we doom ourselves to the endless pursuit of a joy that we will never find, because in the process we have ignored real joy.

Think of something that you have wanted so badly you could almost taste it. For instance, do you remember when you got your first car? Mine was a total surprise. My mom and dad gave it to me for Christmas when I was 20 years old. I had gone through more than two years of college living on campus with no car and it was really getting old. I longed to have a car, and then my parents shocked me by giving me one when it seemed impossible. It was a yellow Opel Kadet. Stop laughing. They were able to get it for me precisely because it was an Opel. It had a luxurious vinyl interior, hand crank windows, manual door locks and no radio. It had exactly zero options. It came with an engine, transmission, tires, seats, windows, a steering wheel and nothing else. And I was thrilled. It was so exciting. Talk about a joyful Christmas. When you get that car it produces joy, undeniably. There is an emotional jolt that feels like the best thing ever. But it doesn't last,

does it? All too soon it was just a car. Having that car was huge for me for several reasons, but one of them was I was dating a girl that lived maybe 10 miles from my college. It was a real challenge to find ways to take her out when I didn't have wheels. With my new car that problem was solved. Maybe a month after I got the car she decided to seek greener pastures, which I found ironic because she lived on a dairy farm, and she dumped me. The joy of having the car didn't seem to matter at that point. Fast forward a few years to when I was in graduate school and was dating another girl, the one who would become my wife. My car was a source of annoyance as it kept breaking down. Although one of its breakdowns played a role in Laurie and me getting engaged.

Our enemy strives mightily to get us to attach our joy to a lifelong series of pursuits of these ersatz sources of joy. They are tantalizing, and when we gain them we do indeed get a bump, a surge of joy, but it is never joy that "cannot be taken away."

Satan has other tactics for robbing us of joy. One is guilt. It is impossible to be joyful when you feel guilty. The guilt blots out joy. It eats away at your soul. Satan is great at playing the guilt card. He does it continually. He tells you that God is like everyone else you know. He cannot love you if you don't at least have some semblance of being good. Then Satan pounds away at every failing, every weakness. He shouts at you about how worthless and feckless you are, how far you are from what you ought to be. The guiltier you feel, the less joy you have.

Another ploy of Satan is fear. Are you happy when you are afraid? Do you exude joy when you are petrified? Of course not. Isn't it interesting how often God says to people "do not be afraid" in the Bible. Satan does the opposite. He is continually saying, "Be afraid. Be very afraid." I was talking recently with a friend who has been fired from his job, which he didn't deserve. He feels like he's staring down the barrel of a gun. His severance package ends soon. He's got some leads for jobs, but it is likely that none of them will bear fruit before he's out of money. He's been waking up early in the morning and can't get back to sleep because of concerns about the future. There is no joy in those dark hours.

Satan also uses disappointment. By that I mean all the hardships and losses life throws at you. The poster child here is Job. He had it really good, then Satan took everything away from him. When you suffer loss, when you are attacked, when life seems to hold nothing but bitterness for you, joy can easily become only a faint memory.

Satan will also use people to try to rob you of joy. There may be people who want to do harm to you, for whatever reasons. But there is a more common way Satan uses people to take away our joy. They do it without even knowing it. They do it unintentionally.

There are people who are joy sappers. They just seem to suck the joy out of any room they enter. They may not consciously set out to steal joy from others, but somehow they do it very effectively. We had one neighbor for a while that was like that. Every interaction I had with the man was unpleasant and seemed to suck joy out of the air. Most of us have someone in our lives like that. Some are related to people like that. They are very good at sucking joy right out of the air.

There are other people who have no ill-will, yet nevertheless have the effect of robbing us of joy. They don't do that by attacking us, but by joining in Satan's attempt to tantalize us. Our entire society is an example. It is specifically designed by Satan to try to press us into its mold, to get us to fall for its lies that if we will only pursue what the society is pursuing, we'll find joy. And it's all a lie. Al Menconi has long preached that the impact of the entertainment media in our culture is to rob us of joy.

We had another neighbor that I liked a lot. He seemed to be a great guy. He was always friendly and eager to talk when I saw him. When Toby and I would go out in the street and throw the football around he would come out and join us. He was a very likeable guy. But he exerted a subtle pressure. He always had to have the latest and best toys. He needed the hottest car, the best dog, the fastest wave runner, the coolest television and so on. And he was always about making more money. He'd talk and I'd feel this tug. I'm not making enough money. I'd sure love to have what he has. He's got his plan for the future and all the money he's going to have, and my plan is "come quickly, Lord Jesus."

He wasn't trying to sway me. He wasn't intentionally trying to rob me of joy. But even without purposely setting out to do that, he exerted this subtle pressure to take my joy away. I would eventually learn that his life was an illusion. He was making little money, his wife was supporting them and providing all the toys, and they weren't getting along. It all unraveled when she got fed up and they got divorced and sold their house.

Our joy will be attacked, but that doesn't mean the attacks will be successful.

## WE CAN HAVE IMPERVIOUS JOY

Jesus promised that his followers could have joy that nothing could ever take away. He promised permanent joy. This is real and possible. My favorite example of this in the Bible is the Macedonian Christians. 2 Corinthians 8:2 says of them, “Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.” They had joy-robbers in abundance. They lived in a society that was fully as anti-joy as ours, if not more so. Just by living in line with their culture they would miss out on joy. They also lived in what Paul called “extreme poverty.” That is a level of poverty that is beyond our ability to understand. But poverty wasn’t all they faced. They were also opposed and persecuted. They had “severe trials.” There were people in their lives who intentionally wanted to inflict pain on them.

They faced it all, Satanic opposition, societal rejection and ostracism, hardship and loss in abundance, and enemies who despised them. And Paul said they had “overflowing joy.” Clearly it was a joy that was impervious to all those attacks. It wasn’t a trickle of joy that they were grimly hanging onto, a little shred of joy that had been torn to tatters. It was a joy that overflowed, that could not be contained.

How is that possible? In our parenting class we’ve been watching a video by Paul Tripp. He brought up a principle that has direct bearing on joy. That principle is that we experience life not on the basis of facts, but on the basis of our interpretation of the facts.

Let me give you an example. Our son-in-law, Michael grew up partly in Park City, Utah and partly in LaGrange, a small city in Georgia. After he graduated from the University of Georgia he enlisted in the Marines and went to flight training. He finished first in his class so he got his pick of aircraft types. He chose fighter jets. So he was sent to Meridian Naval Air Station for jet training. Meridian, Mississippi is similar in size to LaGrange where he grew up. He loved the 18 months he spent in Meridian before graduating, again at the top of his class, and being assigned to the Green Knights, an F18 squadron based here at MCAS Miramar. In August 2012 his squadron was being shuffled, so he needed a new assignment. When he put in his list of requested assignments that would come after his duty in Afghanistan second on the list was being a flight instructor at Meridian. He was thrilled when he got that assignment. He had loved it there and was happy to go back. In early November last year he and Carissa flew to Meridian to look for a place to live. They were there about 5 days before returning to San Diego. That Sunday after church we took Michael and Carissa out to lunch. As we talked about

their new home Michael said a kind of funny thing. He said, “You know, Meridian is a lot more redneck than I remembered.”

Had Meridian changed? No, it is almost exactly as it was back in 2008. The *facts* were the same. What had changed? Michael had spent good portions of the previous 5 years living in San Diego. His perception and his interpretation of the facts of Meridian were what had changed, not Meridian itself.

This truth comes into play constantly in life. It has direct implications for the question of joy. Consider the Macedonian Christians. They lived in circumstances that would cause most people to feel they had a raw deal in life. Many people in their circumstances would be disappointed, discouraged, even bitter. Yet they had overflowing joy. What was the difference? It was not the facts. It was their interpretation of the facts. Something about the way they viewed life enabled them to be joyful in a joy-sapping circumstance.

The point is that how we think about life, the grid through which we view all that happens to us is totally crucial for joy. With the right grid in place it is possible to have joy that cannot be taken away. The converse of that is also true. With the wrong grid we guarantee ourselves the absence of joy. I have used Weed-B-Gone on weeds on our driveway. In short order those weeds shrivel up and die. Think of having a bad mental grid, a wrong way of interpreting life, as spraying Joy B Gone on your life. Joy will shrivel up and die in short order.

One of the most effective ways of destroying joy is to adopt the world’s way of interpreting life. That way of interpreting life has a heavy dose of “me” in it. It essentially comes down to the idea that there is a formula of things in this world that I must have, and that if I get that formula then I will have joy. We go through life adjusting that formula because we get the formula and find it doesn’t work, so we change the components. Surely if we get them in the right amounts then the formula will finally produce joy. That’s what the world thinks. That’s its mental grid. Just ask yourself, do you see most of the people in the world as being full of joy? Are they exuberant? If not, why adopt their way of interpreting life? Yet we do it. We create our formulas for what we need to have joy.

What happens is we go through life encountering things and people that get in the way of our ability to get the components of the formula in the prescribed amounts. So we become frustrated with the people and the situations that stand in our way.

1 Peter 2:11 says, “Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul.” We think of those as really bad desires, but that’s not always the case. It could be desires for things that are neutral or even good, but we make them the most important thing, the thing we think we must have to get joy. When we do that they war against our souls. They destroy joy, not provide it.

Ephesians 4:22 says a similar thing. “You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.” The desires are deceitful in that they lie to us and promise us something they cannot deliver. When we pursue them as our necessary goal they corrupt our lives.

One of the things that kills our joy is we create this formula in our minds and then compare. We see other people who have more of the components we think we need for joy. Recently for some reason I was thinking about how unfair life can be. My mother and father both contributed genes to my brother and me. They were the same genes. Yet he got genes that made him bigger, stronger and more athletic than me. So all my life he’s always been the better athlete. He also got genes that enabled him to have a good singing voice and musical ability. I was shortchanged on that account too. Then have you noticed that he has a full head of hair? Once again I got the crummy genes. Does this look fair to you? It doesn’t to me.

You see how that deal works. Comparing is a sure way to come up with reasons why I should not be joyful. Of course when you do that you always do selective comparing. For instance, I conveniently leave out that my brother has also had two back surgeries and to this day is limited by issues with his back. I’ve had zero back surgeries.

The key element of the mental grid when we compare and when we buy into the world’s system is that joy is only possible when I get for myself what I think I need. In short, it is about me. Here is a truth we all need to grasp. ***The greatest poison for joy is self.*** Self is Joy B Gone. As long as you are focused on what you need or want, which is the heart of the world’s mental grid, you will never have impervious joy.

I will direct your attention back again to the ancient Macedonian Christians. Whatever your formula for joy, they didn’t have it. If they compared themselves with others they would have reason to complain and pity themselves, for even poor people were better off than they were. And yet they overflowed with joy. They

looked at their hardships, their grinding poverty, the ostracism and rejection they faced and interpreted all of it in a way that enabled them to be joyful.

Let's remember that for us joy is not an independent, uncaused emotion. It is always caused by something. I experienced joy that Christmas day when my parents gave me my first car. I experienced way more joy the day I got married. What a joyful day that was. It produced undeniable joy for me.

So joy is caused. If your joy is caused by something, some object, some person, some set of circumstances in this world, it can and will change, and can be taken away completely. If it is of this world it cannot be permanent, for nothing in this world is permanent. Every person, object or circumstance that brings you joy will change and very possibly could be taken away from you. Therefore they can never produce permanent, impervious joy.

Peggy Noonan, who writes for the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote an article in *Forbes* magazine a few years back. In it she wrote, "We weren't put here to be happy. Somewhere in the 70's or the 60's we started expecting to be happy. And we changed our lives, left town, left families, switched jobs if we were not. And society strained and cracked in the storm...I think we have lost the old knowledge that happiness is over rated. We've lost somehow a sense of mystery about us, our purpose, our meaning, our role. Our ancestors believed in two worlds and understood this to be the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short one. We're the first generation of man that have actually expected to find happiness here on earth. And our search for it has caused such unhappiness. If you do not believe in another higher world, if you believe only in the flat material world around you, if you believe this is your only chance at happiness...then you are not disappointed when the world doesn't give you a good measure of its riches—you are despairing."

Is it not obvious, then, if we are to have joy that cannot be taken away it must be caused by something not of this world, something that is permanent and cannot be taken away? Does that mean that it is wrong to find joy in the things of this world? Of course not. 1 Timothy 4:4 tells us that what God has created is good and is to be received with thanksgiving. It is natural and good to be joyful over that new car, or over your spouse, your child, or whatever it is that brings you joy. We just need to remember that this is not the joy that is foundational. Welcome the joy, but remember that it can go away at any time. We need to have a deeper joy that is caused by that which will never change.



Shortly before Thanksgiving Toby was coming home from college. Laurie had a couple of discouraging days. She was a little stressed because of the upcoming holiday. To top it all off she got a cold and felt lousy. She was down, stressed, feeling miserable and worn out. Toby was going to get home late, well after midnight. Early in the evening Laurie gave in to her illness and exhaustion and went to bed. I stayed up to wait for Toby. When he got home Laurie appeared. I thought she would just welcome him home and go back to bed. But when your kids are away at college and you miss them like we did, the best thing that could happen was for one to come home. This was cause for real joy and celebration. Laurie didn't go back to bed. She was still sick, tired, stressed, but she was joyful. She stayed up to the wee hours of the morning talking with Toby, excited and happy. Her circumstances were not joyful, but she was, because she had something better and more important than the difficulties in her life.

So what was that grid that enabled the disciples and the Macedonian Christians to be joyful? It was sparked by what we celebrated last Sunday, Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Because of that event they now had a new grid for viewing life and circumstances.

They knew that God is very real, he is active in this world, and that he loved them. They knew he had forgiven them of all their sin and wrong and made a way for them to be in a never ending, uninterrupted love relationship with him as their Father. They knew that he was going to be with them and that he would never abandon them, that he would strengthen them as they went through the events of their lives. They knew that God is powerful and that he will win, even when it appears hopeless. They knew that life after death is real, and by faith in Jesus they were guaranteed to spend that eternity in God's kingdom of joy. They knew that they had a real purpose in this world, and it was to make know the glory of their heavenly Father.

Those Macedonian Christians went from living in a dark, difficult place with no way to truly connect with the true God, from a place full of fear, from being loaded down with guilt and having no hope, from being nobodies with no significance and no purpose in life, to knowing God, being loved and forgiven, to having hope, to being beloved children of the Father with no fear and with an eternally significant calling in life. That was reason for joy, no matter what might happen to them.

### CONCLUSION

God seems to think I ought to practice what I preach, so he gives me the opportunity to do so. I felt lousy physically all week. I wanted to just curl up and

feel sorry for myself. God said, “Uh, about that joy business...” So I had the chance to apply what I say. So I got to practice this week before preaching. Here are a few suggestions for you that helped me this week.

### GIVE THANKS FOR THE GOOD

Even on our difficult days there is much good that God brings into our lives. Enjoy the good things that God blesses you with, and don't just enjoy them but give thanks for them. The more public your thanksgiving the better.

### MAJOR IN PRAISE OF THE FATHER

If you read through the Psalms you will eventually notice that there is a connection between praising God and rejoicing. The more you make your life about worshiping and praising God the more rejoicing you will do.

### MAKE YOUR LIFE ABOUT SERVING RATHER THAN SELF

Looking for joy is a good thing. It is commanded by God. But understand if you approach life with the grid that you will find joy by getting what you think you want and need, you have bought into the world's grid. You are squirting yourself with Joy B Gone. When you make your life about honoring God, serving him and giving to others, seeing how you can be a blessing to them, that's when you will start to experience joy. Find your joy in glorifying God and in giving to people in your life day in and day out.

### FOCUS ON THE BIG PICTURE

We went to Disney World three years ago. We were staying at the Caribbean Beach Resort, a Disney hotel. They have a food court and a store where you can eat or buy food to take to your room plus much typical Disney paraphernalia. One evening I was in the store buying some milk and cereal for breakfast the next morning and I noticed a family doing some shopping. Mom, dad and three kids. One young daughter, maybe 4 years old, was wearing a Disney princess shirt and Minnie Mouse ears. She decided she wanted one of those Disney mega suckers. Her parents said no because it would spoil her dinner. But she insisted. It got her nowhere. Her insistence morphed into whining, but mom and dad stood firm. And then the storm hit. She ratcheted up to a full on tantrum. Her parents were so mean, she wanted it, why couldn't she have it, life wasn't worth living without this sucker. It was amazing. I couldn't help but think, “Young lady, could you just step back and take a look at the bigger picture. You are at Disney stinking World. Your parents have paid thousands of dollars to travel here, put you up in a wonderful resort hotel, bought you Disney clothes, are feeding you Disney food and providing you the chance to spend your days reveling in one amusement park after

another. They are giving you a tremendous gift. Don't you think that's just a little bigger than that sucker?" I wanted to ask her, "Let's suppose that you could have the sucker but not come to Disney World. Would that make you happy?"

Obviously that would be a terrible trade. Being at Disney World was way better, infinitely more important and joyful, than that silly sucker. But she was tantalized by the sucker. That's our situation. We have been given all that Jesus has done for us. It is an incredible joy-causing gift. And we get focused on the suckers of this world, convinced there could never be joy if we don't get them.

Jesus has risen from the dead. You have been forgiven. You are loved by God. He is your Father who will never abandon you. You have the certain hope of the resurrection. You will live forever in God's kingdom of joy because of what Jesus has done for you. Don't get hung up on suckers when you're living in Disney World.