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MUCH BETTER THAN CHEETOS
1 Thessalonians 5:16

When in your life have you most felt joy? What caused that joy? Most of us actually have precious few occasions when we truly felt filled with joy. That's sad, because we all have an ache for that. Some of us cannot recall any time when we were truly joyful. Yet all of us wish that we were filled with joy.

There are a lot of claims about where joy comes from. Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the French writer and aviator, said, "True happiness comes from the joy of deeds well done, the zest of creating new things." The late Christopher McCandless, the American hiker who was the subject of Jon Krakauer's book *Into The Wild*, said, "The joy of life comes from our encounters with new experiences." Franklin Roosevelt said, "Happiness lies in the joy of achievement." Michael Jordan said his most intense joy came from the game of basketball.

Obviously they don't agree. Is joy from creating new things, from having new experiences, in achievement? It might lead one to think joy is in the eye of the beholder, and to some extent that is true. But all those claims have one thing in coming. Their joy cannot last. What if you can no longer create new things for some reason? What if you aren't able to have new experiences? What if you've done your best but can't seem to achieve very much? Where does Michael Jordan get his joy now, since he no longer can play basketball? Is he doomed to live the rest of his life trying to find something, anything that can replace that joy now lost and mostly longing for the joyful days of his youth that will never come back?

I submit to you that all those people are talking about things that made them happy, but that if joy is to be something that is characteristic of us on an ongoing basis, it must come from something else. I am going to draw your attention to the subject of joy today, a topic that comes up in 1 Thessalonians 5:16.

PREMISE: GOD COMMANDS US TO ALWAYS REJOICE

The Thessalonians faced what Paul called in 1:6 "severe suffering." In 2:14 he mentioned that they were suffering persecution at the hands of their own people. It doesn't take a rocket scientist or a Bible scholar to figure out that the Thessalonian Christians were dealing with some serious persecution and difficulty. They were not having fun.

Given that circumstance, what sort of mind set would you expect Paul to encourage them to have? Maybe to be strong and sort of bear up under all of it stoically? What he tells them in 1 Thessalonians 5:16 is almost shocking. He tells them to “rejoice always.” The word translated “rejoice” is derived from the Greek word for joy. It is sometimes translated “be glad” and in one translation “be merry.”

Paul is telling them to choose to be joyful and glad. In the face of terrible, frightening circumstances he told them to be merry! That is not the normal response to the kind of thing they were facing. It would be a dramatic and noticeably different way to behave, one that would be powerful, because joy in and of itself is terrifically appealing to us. No matter the situation this verse says joy should be characteristic of followers of Jesus.

One researcher studied 1000 churches that he deemed to be effective, successful churches. They were churches of all sizes and brands. He wanted to see what these effective churches had in common. He found a number of characteristics, mostly the kinds of things you would expect. They had vibrant worship, relevant teaching and so on. But one quality jumped out. He said they were all marked by joy. More than 70% of their members would agree with the statement, “there is a lot of laughter in our church.”

Pastor and author Bryan Wilkerson had an interesting conversation with a woman one Sunday morning at his church. She had not been attending the church very long. She commented on something that surprised her about the church. She said, “I really didn’t expect to enjoy it so much. You know, it’s church.” She thought you have to endure church. Many people think attending church is a duty, kind of a way to earn points with a God who is kind of down on us already. It’s okay if church is deadly dull, because you get more points for enduring it the more difficult it is to endure, right? This passage tells us that a church should be a place filled with joy. Even in hard times followers of Jesus should be rejoicing. Paul commanded those followers of Jesus not just to endure it all, not just to rejoice on occasion in the midst of their difficulties, but to rejoice *always*. They were to be full of joy all the time! And so are we.

Sometimes we make a distinction between happiness and joy. There is a valid point to be made there. Happiness is an emotion derived from some pleasant circumstance or event. It can dissipate in the blink of an eye. You’re watching a football game involving a team you root for fervently. It’s the final moments, your team is behind, then they throw a long pass, the receiver catches it and runs free

into the end zone for a game winning touchdown. You are happy to the max, and then you notice somebody's yellow handkerchief on the field. There is a penalty. On your team. One of the linemen was holding. You are no longer happy. Now you're instantly depressed.

Joy is deeper and more enduring. So there is a difference, but these two are closely related. My concern is that I've seen Christians say, "I'm not happy, but I am joyful." But if you looked at them you'd say, "If that's joy, I want no part of it. It looks miserable." If you are rejoicing you really are happy about something, and it will show. A person who is rejoicing isn't grumpy, defeated, and the definition of a walking buzz kill. The rejoicing will show in the person's demeanor.

This is not the only place in the Bible where we see this command. In Philippians 4:4 Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Why did he feel like he had to say it again? Because he knew that the reaction to what he said would likely be, "say what?" Paul knew that the Philippians, who were also dealing with dire circumstances, might have been taken aback by a command to rejoice in their situation so he reiterated his command. It was so important that he said it again to emphasize it. God wants us to rejoice, and he wants us to do it all of the time. Psalm 32:11 commands us "rejoice in the Lord and be glad, you righteous. Sing, all you who are upright in heart." Literally that last part says to shout. We are to be so glad, so full of joy in God that we shout!

Most of us don't rejoice all the time and don't know anyone who does. That's why Paul commanded this. If we did it naturally he wouldn't have had to teach us to do it. He commanded this precisely because it is not natural. But you may be thinking "How can he command us to be joyful all the time?" How do we do that?

WHY IS JOY IMPORTANT?

Because it reflects the character of God

In John 15:11 after instructing his disciples about remaining in him Jesus said, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." Some people assume that Jesus was a joyless, serious, stick in the mud, who never smiled. If that were so I'm pretty sure our reaction to that statement would be, "Great, if I do what Jesus says I can have his joy, which looks exactly like unhappiness and grumpiness. Where do I sign up for that?"

I recently took note of a commercial for an exercise machine. The commercial briefly showed a person using the machine. The person was a slender young lady in brief exercise clothes. The message was, "buy this product, ladies, and you can

have this woman's shape." It was intended to be motivating. How do you think it would go over if they showed some shirtless, sweaty guy with a belly so big it looked like he was a month from delivering a baby, working away on their machine? I'm pretty sure they'd get a big "no thanks" from that. Wow, if I buy their machine I could look like him! Wouldn't that be heavenly! If Jesus were joyless I am quite sure the offer to have his joy would have been imminently unappealing.

Jesus intended that statement to be a compelling motivator for his disciples. It would only serve that purpose if they experienced Jesus as possibly the most joyful person they had ever encountered. It only worked if they said, "I'd give anything to be as full of joy as Jesus." They had watched Jesus up close and personal for a couple of years and seen him face both some extreme highs and deep lows, all the while maintaining a buoyant, positive, infectious spirit. Have you ever wondered why people of all kinds were drawn to him? A big part was the grace and love he exuded, but another part was that he was a delight to be around. Today many people miss the fact that he was also often very funny. Jesus was so characterized by joy that he could tell them if they had his joy in them it would be complete. In other words, they would have total joy, more joy than they had ever experienced or even imagined. It was the character of Jesus and of the Father to be filled with joy.

That's who Jesus is still today. In Romans 14 Paul was discussing the disagreement that the Roman Christians were having about the rules regarding what they should and shouldn't eat. This was not a nutritional discussion, but a religious one. He pretty much said the whole discussion was a rabbit trail. In verse 17 he said, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." The kingdom of God is a matter of joy. It is characterized by joy because God is characterized by joy. Where he rules, there is going to be joy, and lots of it! Our job is to reflect the character of God to the world, and we cannot do that unless we are filled with his joy.

People have a lot of ideas about what God is like, but the most persistent is that he is a rather glowering judge who can barely restrain his unhappiness and anger at us. If we see God that way how will it affect us? Will we be anxious to be around him? Will we want to know him? No, we will want to do whatever is necessary mostly to just stay off his radar. I just had an unsettling encounter with the IRS. I was expecting our tax refund, but it didn't come. Then one day we received a letter from the IRS. I was not happy when I saw it. I don't experience the IRS as a joyful, life-giving group of people. Quite the opposite. They are powerful and a bit threatening. As a result I want as little to do with them as possible. The same is

going to be true of God if we see him as threatening. But if we see him as full of joy, peace, life and love, we will naturally gravitate toward him.

This is crucial, for it affects those who are not believers. With that negative view of God they won't want any part of him. But it also affects believers. If we have that negative view of God we will not trust him and the last thing we will want is to be with him. But who would not be drawn to a God who is so full of joy that the best thing we could imagine is having his joy in us?

Because we are desperate for joy

Part of the human condition is that we want joy. In fact we almost demand that we have it. In his book, *Pensees*, the great scientist and philosopher Blaise Pascal wrote, "All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end... This is the motive of every action of every man."

Why do you go to work? Ultimately it is because you are seeking joy. Hold on, that can't be. Many, maybe most of us, don't get joy out of our work. We don't go to work to be filled with joy. Maybe not the job itself, but the pay you earn allows you to purchase the things you need to have joy. You couldn't be joyful if you had no food, no clothes, no place to live. You need those things to have joy so you go to work to get the money to obtain them. Why do students go to school and do their homework? It is because they want joy. Why do you watch television at times? It is because you want joy. Why do you pay your bills? It is because you want joy. Why do you brush your teeth? Because you want joy. Every action you take, every single one, ultimately is driven by the desire for joy.

We are as spiritually hungry for joy as our bodies are physically hungry for food. When we don't have joy the absence will gnaw at us like hunger pangs gnaw at our bodies. It will drive us like hunger drives us. Imagine that you haven't eaten in days and you are starving. There is no food to be found, but then you find a box full of bags of Cheetos. What do you do? You have a Cheetos orgy. That quiets the hunger pangs briefly. But you get no real nutrition from Cheetos. You do not get what you need to be healthy from them. Eating them may give you momentary relief, but they cannot nourish your body.

The problem for us is if we don't get our joy from the real source, we will go looking for it somewhere, anywhere, because our souls must have it. But the joys of this world, though real, are momentary and cannot give us the joy we need.

Perhaps you heard about actor Jim Carrey's comments at this year's Golden Globe awards. Before announcing the nominees for Best Motion Picture Comedy he said to the elite of Hollywood, "I am two time Golden Globe Winner, Jim Carrey. When I go to sleep at night, I'm not just a guy going to sleep. I'm two time Golden Globe winner Jim Carrey going to get some well needed shuteye. When I dream, I don't just dream any old dream. No sir. I dream about being three time Golden Globe winning actor, Jim Carrey. Because then I would be enough. It would finally be true. And I could stop this terrible search for what I know ultimately won't fulfill me."

WHY SHOULD WE BE JOYFUL?

Joy is always caused by something. We don't rejoice for no reason. A wedding, the birth of a child, some great victory, the success of a child, all of these cause us great joy. But Paul says we are to rejoice **always**. That means there must be something causing us joy always. I woke up one day recently and my elbow was hurting because I have lateral epicondylitis, otherwise known as tennis elbow. My hip was hurting because, according to the doctor, I have some soft tissue injury there due to some stretching exercises I've been doing that are supposed to help me be healthy. My back was stiff and hurting. One knee is barking at me, and it hit me that this is not going to get better. I'm at an age where I'm probably feeling as good as I'm going to feel from here on out. I have this mindset from my younger days that I have an injury, it heals, then I'm done with it, feeling as good as ever. It's frustrating when the doctor essentially says, "You're old. This is part of the deal. Get used to it."

I had a recent physical exam. My doctor had a young woman there who is training to be a physician's assistant. As part of her training she is following the doctor and doing her own exams of patients. As she was examining me she said that she and her fellow students practice their skills on each other. But they are all in their 20's and healthy. She said she valued the opportunity to examine someone who is old. I thought, "Really? You're going to go with how great it is to get to deal with someone who is old and breaking down so you can find all the problems?" That's just terrific isn't it? Unfortunately it is the new normal for me, and this verse says I'm supposed to rejoice in being old, falling apart and knowing that it's downhill from here? Yes, in the middle of all of that, and everything else in life, I am to rejoice because ***I have reason to.***

We have hope

In Luke 10 Jesus sent his disciples out to tell people about him. When they came back they were totally pumped. They were excited and rejoicing because they

experienced things they could never have imagined. Jesus gave them power to heal people and free them from spiritual captivity. They were astounded at what God had done, and he had used them to do it. It was thrilling.

It's easy to see why they were rejoicing. Recently we were about to leave on an errand when we saw a couple of our neighbors. It was apparent that they wanted to talk. So we visited with them. The wife is dealing with a long standing physical problem that had just gotten worse. But there was more grim news. Her brother, who is 36 years old, had just been diagnosed with what appears to be an almost certainly terminal cancer. How do you think it would feel if I were able to be used by God to heal that woman, and even her brother? Do you think I'd be excited? That would be thrilling. We would all rejoice in a huge way. That's what the disciples were experiencing.

In verse 20, after saying it was great that they enjoyed that power he had given them, Jesus said, "However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven." The thing that is the most joyful and by far the most important is that your name is written in what the book of Revelation calls the book of life. In other words, rejoice because you are guaranteed victory over death. On my birthday Laurie and I went to a nice restaurant. We called and made a reservation. When we arrived we gave the hostess our name and she said, "Yes, your name is written in the book of reservations. We have your table ready." Well, those weren't her exact words, but the point is we didn't have to worry about them having a place for us. It was promised to us. Having your name in the book of life is like having a reservation. You don't have to worry having a place in the kingdom of God. It's a done deal. There is nothing that can compare with having that hope. It is the most valuable thing you could ever possess. It is the biggest cause for joy you will ever know.

Years ago I went through a time where I was experiencing some physical problems that seemed to have to do with my nervous system. It just persisted and got worse until the doctors put me through an extensive battery of tests. The things they were looking for were ominous, things like a brain tumor, Lou Gehrig's disease or MS. At the time our kids were still young and I feared a bleak future in which I might have some awful disease that would take my life. After all of that they ruled out all of the horrible things. The experience left me with some pain that I've experienced ever since, but I don't dwell much on that. I don't like it, but I am alive. The news that I was not going to die from whatever I had was so good that to this day I rejoice even though the pain is not much fun.

Psalm 13:5 says, “My heart rejoices in your salvation.” No matter what may happen in life, we have reason to rejoice because we have the hope of salvation that nothing can diminish or destroy. Being joyless about things we must deal with in our present life even as we know we have the hope of eternal life would be a bit like being given a spectacular house near the beach with a magnificent view of the ocean, a house with the most updated features and appliances, with a pool and Jacuzzi, then being disconsolate when you learn that it doesn’t have a trash compacter. “How am I supposed to be happy with this place when it doesn’t have a trash compacter? I don’t know if I can deal with this. I am so depressed. I don’t know if I want this house.” Are you kidding me? That house is worth millions. It is a dream home. Who cares if it doesn’t have a trash compacter?

God gives us good

Deuteronomy 26:11 commanded the people of Israel once they were in the Promised Land, “You and the Levites and the foreigners residing among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given to you and your household.” We should also rejoice because of all the good God gives us.

I’ve already mentioned eternal life, but there’s so much more. We have his everlasting love being poured out on us daily, and it is unconditional. Nothing will stop him from loving us. We have his presence with us. We have his Word to direct our lives. We have brothers and sisters in Christ to encourage us, and so much more.

In addition to all those priceless spiritual blessings God has showered us in particular with so many physical gifts. I recently wrote a blog about some missionaries in Cameroon. They related some stories of what their life is like there. Among other things during worship services biting ants fall out of their thatch roof onto them and bite them. To my knowledge I have never been bitten by a biting ant in my life, much less during the worship service. We have so much that we take for granted. In my many years on this earth I have never missed a meal because I have nothing to eat.

I have an incredible wife, terrific children, including my kids’ spouses, I had great parents and a great brother, I have wonderful friends, I live in San Diego County near the ocean. Do you know what a privilege that is? Years ago when we went to Nashville for a family event we were talking to a waiter in a restaurant. He asked where we were from and we said, “San Diego,” he replied in utter surprise, “What are you doing *here*?” In other words, why on earth would you leave beautiful San Diego to come to this place? God has been exceedingly gracious to us. And we can

be completely confident that he will continue to be because he is good. It is his nature.

God reigns

1 Chronicles 16:31 says, “Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad; let them say among the nations, ‘the Lord reigns.’” The thing that should cause all of creation to rejoice is that God reigns.

Years ago we were traveling to Seattle on a flight that had an intermediate stop in Sacramento. I grew up in the Central Valley so I am thoroughly familiar with a weather feature that is quite common in the winter, and that’s thick fog. As we descended toward Sacramento we went through fog so thick I could hardly see the tip of our plane’s wing. It was unsettling knowing that the pilots could not see any more than I could. How could they know where they were going? What if there was some idiot flying his plane in the wrong place right in our path? The pilots would see it only milliseconds before we hit it. And how did they know they were anywhere near the airport? How would they ever find the runway and be able to land with nearly no visibility? It did not make me even a little bit happy. But then I realized a couple of things. That aircraft could actually have landed itself without a pilot doing a thing. On top of that they were being guided by air traffic controllers who made sure they were in the right place and there was no traffic in front of them. In other words, the whole thing was completely under control. The fact that I did not need to worry about the plane being controlled allowed me to relax and enjoy the flight.

In life we are flying through some rough weather. We can’t see 10 feet in front of us. We have no idea of what lies ahead, but have found out there are lots of potential disasters lurking out there. If we think we’re going through life flying completely blind, totally victim to the whims of often cruel fate, we will be the farthest thing from joyful. That verse in 1 Chronicles 16 reminds us that is not our situation. We are under radar control from God, who is directing us where we need to go. That doesn’t mean that nothing bad will ever happen. But it does mean that we are going where we need to be. Our God reigns, and even when confusing, grievous events occur, we can rejoice in that truth. None of this is truly random. There is meaning and there is hope in everything in our lives because God reigns. This is reason to rejoice even when we may not like what is happening. In his commentary on 1 Thessalonians Charles Wanamaker wrote, “To rejoice always is to see the hand of God in whatever is happening.”

APPLICATION

How can we increase our joy in every circumstance that we will encounter?

CHOOSE JOY

Let's remember that we are *commanded* to rejoice here. We think usually that joy is something that happens to us. Because of what Jesus has done for us we have reason to rejoice even when hit with serious disappointments or hurts. We have hope, God is pouring out his grace and goodness on us, and God still is on his throne and at work in our lives. Too often we are like that person who has been given that incredible mansion, and we're upset about the lack of a trash compacter.

We know we can choose joy because the ancient Christians of Philippi and Thessalonica did it. In 2 Corinthians 8:2 Paul said of them, "In the midst of severe trial, their overflowing joy and extreme poverty welled up to rich generosity." They had overflowing joy because they chose to despise miserable circumstances.

In his book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell reported on a very interesting psychological study. The subjects were a large number of college students. They were told that the study was market research for a company that makes headphones. They were divided into 3 groups. They all used the headphones to listen to some popular songs then a radio editorial about a proposal to raise tuition at their school. One group, the control group, was told to simply sit still and listen. The second group was told to listen and while doing so to vigorously nod their heads up and down. The third group was instructed to shake their heads from side to side while listening. After they listened they were asked some questions about the quality of the headphones, plus one more question. They were asked what they thought the tuition should be at their school. The control group thought on average the tuition should be about what it already was. The group that shook their heads in "no" fashion, thought tuition should be lowered, not raised. The group that nodded their heads thought tuition should be raised. The simple act of nodding their heads as though in agreement caused them to decide to agree with the editorial!

That rather curious study suggests that our thoughts and feelings can be affected by things we choose to do. The implication here is that if we choose to look at the grace we receive continually instead of focusing on the hardships and disappointments of life we not only can actually choose to rejoice in them, we can actually begin to feel more joyful as we do so.

SERVE

There is a curious paradox in the natural thinking of the human heart. We are committed to ourselves, obsessed with ourselves, and certain that what will bring

us joy and satisfaction is when we have enough, when others love us enough, when others approve of us enough. We want, we want, we want, and we want endlessly. We are never satiated. Somehow, no matter how much of whatever we think we need for joy, we never seem to get enough of it to be permanently happy.

Here is where the paradox comes in. Real joy, the ability to rejoice always, doesn't come from getting, but giving. It comes from loving and serving others. I believe this is what you were created to do. It is built into us, but our own fallen minds and hearts, the enemy and the world, all combine to brainwash us with the idea that giving up self and making other people more important than what we want, is the path to death. It is a flat out lie, designed to completely strip us of joy.

There are researchers that study the topic of joy. There have been numerous studies on the subject, and they all repeatedly show that joy has no significant correlation with money, success, status, age, gender, ethnicity or even physical health. In other words, it is possible to be rich or poor, young or old, man or woman, majority or minority, successful or a nobody, sick or well, and be full of joy. Or you can be any of those things and been totally joyless. What the research shows is that there is a strong correlation with love relationships. We will find joy in loving others, and that means giving to them, blessing them and serving them.

In the movie *3:10 To Yuma* Russell Crowe plays notorious outlaw Ben Wade. In one conversation with good guy Dan Evans, played by Christian Bale, Wade explains that he doesn't like to mess around with doing anything good for other people. He says, "I imagine it's habit forming. Something decent. See that grateful look in their eyes, imagine it makes you feel like Christ hisself."

LIVE IN THE SPIRIT

Galatians 5:22 says that joy is a fruit of the Spirit. Living in the Spirit is living in the reality of grace, knowing that by God's grace you are loved, accepted and valued by God. It means no longer living in fear of condemnation or rejection. It means having hope because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. It means that we no longer need to prove our worth or importance, because we can rest in what we have in Jesus. It means in Christ what you are and what you have is enough. It is being secure, so secure that you are not hung up on yourself, and are able to laugh at yourself.

Recently Laurie and I were out to lunch with friends when Laurie made a kind of embarrassing mistake. A typical human reaction would have been to try to explain it away, cover it up, and feel exposed and embarrassed. Laurie started laughing,

and laughed so hard at herself she infected the rest of us. It was one more example of something a friend recently observed. When Michael Fuelling was staying with us in March he was talking about how his 3 kids have different qualities and strengths. One of them, he said, just brings joy everywhere she goes. Then he said, “She’s like you, Laurie. You bring joy everywhere. That is an extremely rare quality. I’m not sure I know any other women who do that.”

I’d like to have that quality too. I’d like to be a person that brings joy everywhere I go. But you cannot bring into situations something you don’t have. For us to bring joy, we must live it. We must choose it and rejoice in the goodness of our God at all times.