

WHERE CAN I FIND JOY?**PSALM 126**

Mark Twain, the great American author, had a bad habit of spicing his conversation with profanity. His wife was a delicate, refined woman who frequently became very upset by his rough language. She tried in many ways to cure him of the habit – always unsuccessfully. On one occasion she tried a shock technique. When Twain arrived home from a trip, he was greeted at the door with a string of profanity from his wife. From the lips of this very proper, polite woman, he heard everything he had ever said and more. Twain stood there at the door quietly listening to everything she said until she had finished. Then he observed, “My dear, you have the words, but not the music!” You have the words, but not the music.

When it comes to living out our lives in the way God intended, I wonder if the same could be said of us. We have the words, but not the music. I’m not talking about profanity now. Instead I simply wonder if we know and use all the words of the Christian faith – in its the concepts, beliefs, and songs, but somehow miss the music of a vital relationship with the living God. One of the most welcome surprises for any Christian is the discovery of how much joy, how much enjoyment, how much laughter, and how much – dare I say it - fun can be found in following Jesus. G.K. Chesterton, the British author and follower of Jesus, called joy “that gigantic secret of the Christian life.” After all, what is the authentic mark of someone truly born again and filled with the Holy Spirit? Is it moral uprightness? Doctrinal correctness? Self-discipline? A sense of duty and responsibility? I’m fascinated by what Jesus said on one occasion, “I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!” (Jo. 15:9-11 NLT) Perhaps joy is the defining mark of a true follower of Jesus. It’s certainly God’s will that your life be inundated with joy. It’s also true joy is the inevitable result of living for and walking with Jesus.

We’re looking at several psalms this summer and seeing how they answer some of life’s big questions. Psalm 126 is all about joy. It answers the question, “Where can I find joy?” If you get anything out of today’s message, I hope it will be a new appreciation for how deep, how rich, and how alive is the experience of God’s joy for God’s people. Let’s get familiar with the psalm again. You might recall that Psalms 120-134 are called “songs of ascent.” I spoke on one of them back in July as did Brian Metzger a few weeks ago. These 15 psalms were sung by the Jewish people as they traveled up to Jerusalem for national worship festivals several times a year. They literally had to walk upwards, climb up, or ascend to get into the city itself. As they did, these songs of ascent helped them reflect on God and His relationship with them. As I reflect on this part of God’s Word, here’s what I learn about joy – God’s joy. First, ...

GOD’S JOY INVOLVES REMEMBERING HIS PAST FAITHFULNESS.

“We laughed and laughed and overflowed with gladness. We were left shouting for joy and singing your praise. All the nations saw it and joined in, saying, ‘The Lord has done

great miracles for them!’ Yes, he did mighty miracles and we are overjoyed!” (Ps 126:2-3 TPT) What was it that caused such joy to grip the heart of the psalmist so powerfully as he made his way up to the city of Jerusalem to worship God? What were the “great and mighty miracles” he referred to there? Well, he probably began to recall many of God’s acts of deliverance and grace for the nation of Israel. There was the father and mother of the Jewish people - Abraham and Sarah – who were way beyond child-bearing years, but they gave birth to Isaac by the direct, miraculous intervention of God. There was the incredible deliverance of the Jewish people from the most powerful nation and ruler on the face of the Earth at the time – Egypt’s Pharaoh – through the hand of a washed up 80 year old named Moses. There was the receiving of God’s Law on tablets of stone by the same man. There were the glorious victories by Joshua as they marched into Canaan, the land promised by God to Abraham centuries earlier. There was the golden age of King David and his son, King Solomon. Days of political dominance and the building of the Temple in Jerusalem followed. But then had come God’s judgement upon sin and persistent idolatry at the hands of both the Assyrians and the Babylonians. National and personal defeat and humiliation. Exile in Babylon for some 70 years. But then because of God’s mighty power and deliverance, a remnant had returned to the land of Israel, because the psalmist says, “When the LORD brought back his exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream!” (Ps. 126:1 NLT)

Joy has a history. What does that mean? It means joy is the result of filling your mind and heart with how God has delivered you and met your needs in the past. Joy is the result of intentionally remembering God’s goodness, love and grace to you and others. The old gospel hymn hits the nail right on the head: “Count your many blessings, name them one by one. Count your many blessings, see what God hath done. Count your blessings! Name them one by one. Count your many blessings, see what God hath done.” That’s precisely what the psalmist was doing here in Psalm 126 – counting his blessings. Remembering what God had done. When you take the opportunity to think back over your life intentionally, the Holy Spirit will bring to your remembrance the many different, gracious ways God intervened in your life. Explicit guidance in a confusing time. Comfort when grief threatened to overwhelm and derail you. Divine strength in a time of profound weakness. Healing physically, emotionally, spiritually. God’s presence in a lonely hour. Provision for your physical needs. God’s peace in a time of great anxiety. That’s one reason joy is something that should get greater, larger, and more significant the longer you follow Jesus. Why? Because the history of God’s acts of love, goodness, and grace toward us becomes greater and more extensive with each passing day. As you fill your mind and heart with examples of God’s grace, you can say with the psalmist, “Our mouths were filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.” (Ps. 126:2 NIV) The Bible also makes it clear that...

GOD’S JOY IS A GIFT FROM GOD.

Are you full of joy today? You might say, “I’m not sure what you mean exactly. I guess I’m happy enough.” I heard a wise observation years ago. Happiness is a human achievement in which we should feel justifiable pride. Let me explain. If you live in a happy home, enjoy a happy marriage, find your work life to be reasonably happy and

positive, and enjoy happy relationships with other family members and friends, let me say to you, “Well done.” Happiness in all those areas of life and living require a certain amount of human effort and skill to realize. If you work hard at those areas of life, chances are you can carve out some well-deserved happiness. There’s everything right, good, wholesome, and appropriate about that. And I don’t think you even have to be a follower of Jesus to experience that kind of happiness.

But joy is another matter altogether. Joy is always, forever, and exclusively a gift from God. It’s never the result of our own effort or skill. Instead, it’s the result or by-product of coming to God and finding joy in Him and His presence even in times of profound personal emptiness when mere happiness eludes us. Again, happiness depends on my efforts and upon circumstances going well in our lives. It can leave us as quickly as it can find us. Joy, on the other hand, can be present and real regardless of our efforts and even in the midst of the harshest of circumstances. It’s found in the steady experience of God’s life, God’s abundance, and God’s presence as we walk the pathways of faith in God and obedience to God day in and day out.

Again, are you full of joy today? Despite the losses, the failures, the disappointments, and the pain of life, is joy present and very much alive in you today? God has created a place in His children for joy. That place gets filled up with something inevitably. It can be the toys and trinkets the world dangles in your face – achievements, possessions, accomplishments. Or, that place in your life and mine can be offered to God to fill with Himself. Even back in the Old Testament, God’s people associated joy with God. “You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever.” (Ps. 16:11 NLT) And then Jesus Himself implied having His joy is one of His primary goals for His followers, “I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!” (Jo. 15:11 NLT)

I have a hunch some of us are a little suspicious of joy – a little nervous +hat God’s joy might do to you. Maybe your understanding of whatever it means to foll-ow Jesus looks a little stiff, a little antiseptic, a little calm and sedate, a little boring, frankly. Is it possible there’s a place inside you and me that can only be effectively filled with God Himself – a spiritual place that touches both your intellect and your emotions – that’s wild, sweet, filled with laughter, exuberance, and something so profoundly good that it almost breaks your heart? I think the Christian leader, Peter, wrote about it when he said this about Jesus, “You love him even though you have never seen him. Though you do not see him now, you trust him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy.” (1 Pt. 1:8 NLT) A glorious, inexpressible joy. Is that in you today?

Before Columbus set sail to cross the Atlantic, it was believed by many that the world ended out there somewhere past the Rock of Gibraltar. The Spanish royal motto was the Latin phrase “Ne Plus Ultra” meaning “there is no more beyond here.” But when Columbus returned, it was now clear he had discovered a whole new world out there. The ancient motto was no longer true or meaningful. Someone made a suggestion that pleased Queen Isabella. They just got rid of the first word – “Ne” – in the royal motto. It became “Plus Ultra” meaning “there is more beyond here.” The same is always true of

a personal relationship with the living God. There is more beyond here. There always is. Here's something else to ponder about God's joy.

GOD'S JOY CAN BE SUDDEN AND UNEXPECTED.

The psalmist said, "Restore our fortunes, LORD, like streams in the Negev." (Ps. 126:4 NIV) The Negev is a desert today – better known as the Sinai. But back in Old Testament times, it was an inhabited, cultivated region known for being dry and arid. When rain finally came, the irrigation ditches filled with water causing instant streams to flow. Grass and flowers bloomed overnight where their seeds had lain dormant in the dry ground. Rain came as a sudden, unexpected gift from the skies.

Sometimes God can just come to you and me unexpectedly and give us a moment of great joy, or wholeness, or peace. It's like a flash flood in the desert. It can happen anywhere or at any time. Maybe you experienced it after viewing a beautiful sunset or taking a walk on the beach. Maybe it was the result of sharing some wonderful hours with a friend or a family member. Have you ever stopped to think that maybe – just maybe – that sense of incredible joy – however momentary and fleeting – was a gift from God? Maybe God gives us a little foretaste every now and then of what Heaven or eternal life with Him will be like. Like the dry Negev, God can invade your life and mine with His grace even after many long months or even years of spiritual barrenness and drought. The rains of His blessing fall. Spiritual life blooms in us again. Those are precious moments to be treasured whenever and however they come. You can't plan for or produce them yourself. You can't make them happen. Instead, they come as a gift from a loving Father.

A man by the name of Sean Coxe says he could always depend on his dad to put life's disasters into perspective whether it was a broken leg or a broken heart. A time came in his life when Sean was devastated by a series of personal crises. Feeling helpless and overwhelmed, he spent his last dollar on a trip to Florida to see his dad. On the final evening of his visit, Sean and his dad stood at the end of a pier watching the sun settle into the Gulf of Mexico. Sean could no longer contain his bitterness. He said, "You know, Dad, if we could take all the great moments we experience in our lives and put them back to back, they wouldn't last twenty minutes." Dad simply responded by saying, "Yup." Sean was stunned by his dad's unexpected agreement. Then his dad looked Sean right in the eyes and added quietly, "Precious, aren't they?" I believe one way we experience God's joy this side of Heaven is simply as His gift to us at different moments of our lives. You can't plan or produce them. You just enjoy them and thank your gracious Father for them when they come. Precious, aren't they? Indeed, they are. "May streams of your refreshing flow over us until our dry hearts are drenched again." (Ps. 126:4 TPT) Here's a final thought about God's joy.

GOD'S JOY CAN BE KNOWN EVEN IN LIFE'S DIFFICULTIES.

I believe that's the psalmist's point in those final verses of Psalm 126. He said, "Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy. They weep as they go to plant their

seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest.” (Ps. 126:5-6 NLT) What’s he talking about there? The psalmist was describing a scene that would have been commonplace for his original audience, but is a bit foreign and strange to us today. Drought was an ever present problem back in Bible times. Some years a farmer went out to plant his crop seed in ground that was parched, dry, and cracked. Things looked grim and hopeless. The farmer knew that he could feed his hungry family the seed itself as food for a few days or weeks. But if he did that, there would be no grain to harvest months later. What should he do? Wiping the tears of concern for his family out of his eyes, he planted the crop seed in faith the rains would come and the eventual harvest of grain would provide far more food for his family several months later than if they consumed the crop seed today. His weeping, anxious doubt, and hard work were rewarded months later when he returned from those same fields joyfully burdened down with sheaves of life-giving grain.

What’s the point? God’s joy is also the result of persevering and hanging in there with God through life’s difficulties believing He will ultimately provide. It’s all about doing the right things in the right ways in life and then trusting God will make it pay off in His own time. Think of the farmer’s seed today as whatever you can contribute to help build God’s Kingdom. Some of them are your resources. You go out and plant your time, your gifts, your tithes and offerings, your talents, your energy, your interests. Dedicate all you can to the Lord and His work and then trust God. He will reap a spiritual harvest from those seeds eventually. Just about anything you give to God can become spiritual seed – even life’s problems, losses, and disappointments. Ever think of your problems as seeds you can plant? When we give even those negative things to God, He can produce a crop of joy from them ultimately. Sometimes God’s joy is the result of sheer perseverance and trusting Him to bring good things tomorrow out of painful stuff today.

Hear those verses again in a different translation. “Those who sow their tears as seeds will reap a harvest with joyful shouts of glee. They may weep as they go out carrying their seed to sow, but they will return with joyful laughter and shouting with gladness as they bring back armloads of blessing and a harvest overflowing!” (Ps. 126:5-6 TPT) God’s joy is never an escape from the realities of life. Weeping and laughter sometimes go together. Instead, we’re reminded here that God’s joy is never destroyed by life’s difficulties. We can delight in the fact God is working out all things in our lives for His glory and our good. Like the farmer, we have to trust God for the future. God is dependable, right? His promises are true. God’s joy doesn’t depend on good luck, escaping life’s difficulties, or avoiding all pain. As I close, I think of the great Christian leader, Paul, imprisoned there in Rome, facing possible execution, but able to say to his fellow followers of Jesus, “Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again—rejoice!” (Ph. 4:4 NLT) Where can you and I find joy? In Jesus alone.

A man by the name of Ron – I don’t know his last name – visited a maximum security prison in Zambia. He represented an international Christian ministry known as Prison Fellowship. His guide was a former prisoner named Nego who had described a secret inner prison built inside to hold the very worst offenders. He was amazed when one of the guards allowed Ron to see this part of the prison facility. Ron described

approaching a steel cage like building covered with wire mesh surrounding a courtyard 15 X 40 feet. 23 hours a day multiple prisoners were kept in cells so small they couldn't all lie down at once. One hour a day they were allowed to walk around the small courtyard. Nego himself had spent 12 years in those cells. Ron remembered when the gate into this inner prison swung open. It revealed squalor unlike any he'd ever seen anywhere. There were no bathrooms. The hot African sun had heated up the steel enclosure unbearably. Ron himself could barely breathe in the foul, stifling atmosphere. He wondered how human beings could possibly live in such a place.

Then something remarkable happened. When Nego introduced Ron to the prisoners, 80 of the 120 inmates went to the back wall of the prison and assembled in rows. At a given signal, they began singing – hymns, Christian hymns – in beautiful harmony. Nego whispered to Ron that 35 of those men had been sentenced to death and would soon face execution. Ron was overwhelmed by the contrast between their peaceful, serene faces and the horror of their surroundings. Then, he noticed that just behind them, almost invisible in the darkness, was an elaborate charcoal sketch drawn on the wall. It showed Jesus stretched out on the cross. The prisoners must have spent hours creating it. It was a powerful reminder that Jesus was right there with them. He was sharing their suffering and giving them joy – yes, joy – enough to sing in such a place.

An extreme example, to be sure. I hope not something anyone here today will ever experience. But it simply underlines what Scripture teaches us. God's joy is all about remembering His faithfulness. God's joy is the gift of God. God's joy can be sudden and unexpected. And, perhaps most importantly, God's joy can be known even in life's difficulties – yes, even in an indescribably terrible prison awaiting execution. Where can you and I find joy? In Jesus alone.