

Learning From Jesus

Week 3

His Joy, His Presence, and His Grace

Key Verse

*These things I have spoken to you,
that my joy may be in you,
and that your joy may be full.*

John 15:11 (ESV)

Reflections on God's Joy

In the early weeks of our time together we are stopping to think about God. Most of the barriers to our faith lie in our thoughts and conceptions of God. That is why the Bible makes so much of issues of truth, falsehood, and idols. It is entirely possible to worship a god of our own imaginations, and find that god entirely unable to deliver us! So, it is important to know God as he really is. Consider this comment by Dallas Willard:

"Jesus good news about the kingdom can be an effective guide for our lives only if we share his view of the world in which we live. To his eyes this is a God bathed and God permeated world... that is inconceivably beautiful and good because of God and because God is always in it... over which he constantly rejoices."

(Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy, p. 61)

So in the past two weeks we have looked at God's goodness and his greatness; they are foundation stones of the good news of the Kingdom. This week we look at his joy, because our confidence in him is linked to our appreciation of the pleasure and delight he takes in our redemption.

We should, to begin with, think that God leads a very interesting life, and that he is full of joy. Undoubtedly he is the most joyous being in the universe. The abundance of his love and generosity is inseparable from his infinite joy.

(Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy, p. 62)

Americans talk a great deal about happiness, but not often of joy. "The pursuit of happiness" is a constitutional right for us, yet as elusive as it is sought. But joy and happiness are not the same thing. Happiness depends upon 'happenings'. It comes from the word "hap" which means "luck, happenstance"; you're just lucky, fortunate, and so you are happy. Happiness is external and based on circumstances; it comes and it goes depending on things you can't control. If the Steelers win, you're happy. If they lose, you're bummed.

But joy is internal and founded upon something far more dependable. The joy the Bible talks about is rooted in the life and character of God himself. When you get it, it stays no matter what your circumstances. No matter who wins and who loses.

This proved a special kind of joy that could withstand the heaviest of blows - that was not dependent on circumstances or events... but was "joy no matter what". Paul wrote his most joyful epistle while he was in jail, including these words:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Php 4:4 (ESV)

Remember the words of Habakkuk (3:17-19)

"Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vine, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior."

Joy comes from the overwhelming confidence that God is in control, that he loves us with an unstoppable love, and that our future is secure. He can repair the unrepairable. He can control the uncontrollable. He can help you when it's hopeless. No matter what I am up against I shall rejoice. "Joy no matter what."

That joy is what won me to Christ...

Reflections on God's Presence

If you sweep through scripture from beginning to end to see the big picture, you will quickly run into the promises of God to be with his people. I call it the 'Immanuel Life'. 'Immanuel' is the Hebrew name for God, and it means "God is with us". Here's how the last chapter of the Bible puts it...

"Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. Rev 21:3

That is a central hope of the Bible and the eternal purpose of God. In the Garden of Eden we see Adam and Eve living the Immanuel life...

Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day... among the trees of the garden.

Gen 3:8 (NIV)

It is a wonderful picture... Adam and Eve walking with God in the cool of the evenings, talking with God about what they are doing together in their 'garden project'. That is God's intention for human life, for your life. But then things went wrong, terribly wrong. Adam and Eve decided to do life on their own, and the world hasn't been the same since.

Cain went away from the presence of the Lord and settled....

Ge 4:16 (ESV)

It is easy to move far away from the presence of the Lord and settle. I've done it; maybe you have, too. The goodness of life erodes. The absence of God becomes normal. Human dignity disappears. Evil becomes ordinary. Your days are boring. The bible has a word for this. The word is 'lost'. When you are lost, you don't even know where you are, or where you want to go, and so you don't know the way. And when you are lost, you don't know what life is for, and so you don't fit in and you just bump around.

If you slow down and listen, though, you pick up some important clues about life. You notice that you feel incomplete, or out-of-sorts, or off-balance. You sense something is missing. There are longings deep inside you that go unanswered. C.S. Lewis wrote about this. He said we have a...

'lifelong... longing to be reunited with something in the universe from which we now feel cut off... to be on the inside of some door which we have always seen from the outside...'

C.S. Lewis (The Weight of Glory)

Ever felt like that? It is a hint God gives you about your life. I've had that experience often. Sometimes I would get a faint memory, and I stopped and tried and grab it... Or it might come in a moment of beauty around me. Or a voice that triggers a recollection and made me think hard and reach out for something profound and important. But I couldn't lay hold of it. I knew that there must be more to life.

Everyone has moments like that. Reminders from deep inside you, reminders from above that you were made for more than this world has to offer. That eternity is close at hand. That you have been put here on earth for a noble purpose. That life is much larger than you dared think. That God made you to be his bride.

Deep inside, you sense these things, and miss these things, and long for these things and look for these things. Don't you? This is the hope of life in the Kingdom of God.

A central theme of the Bible from beginning to end is how God takes the initiative to satisfy this longing with himself. With his own presence. With a love-relationship with him.

To Moses God said,

"My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exo. 33:14).

To Jacob God said,

"I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go" (Gen. 28:15).

To Joshua God said,

"As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Josh. 1:5).

To Israel God said,

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you" (Isa. 43:2).

King David knew this settled everything and prayed to God:

"I will fear no evil; for You are with me..." (Psalm 23.4)

Those people were first in a long line of men and women who have discovered that the secret to life is living in the presence of God. They discovered that you and I am made for more than ourselves. Much more. You and I are made for God himself.

Jesus entered this world to fulfill that promise. Isaiah wrote it hundreds of years earlier and the angel whispered it again to Joseph in a dream.

"The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"—which means, "God with us."

Mt 1:23

Let me ask you a very important question. Where is God? Really. How close is he? Give it some thought. Let's say a phrase together, "God is here." Then put your hand out in front of your face and say it aloud with me. Put your hands above your head and say it aloud with me. Finally, put your hands on your face, cradle your jaws, (as Jesus did when he healed a deaf man in Mk 7.32-35) and say it aloud again. (Dallas Willard's Study Guide to the Divine Conspiracy, p. 35)

Reflection Question: Summarize the key ideas in the Reflection in your own words.

Bible Study: God's Joy and Presence

1. Look up the following verses, and summarize them in the spaces below.

Reference: Acts 16:22-25

Reference: 1 Peter 1:8-9

Reference: Luke 15:5-10, 23-24

Reference: John 16:24

Reference: John 1:14

Reference: Exo 33:15-16

Reference: Mat 28:20

Reference: Heb 13:5,6

2. How would you summarize God's joy?

3. What seems to give God great joy?

4. What do Jesus' words about the Kingdom in Matt 4.17 and Luke 17.21 have to do with the promise of his presence?

5. Does the teachings of the past weeks give you 'clear eyed vision that a totally good and competent God is right here to look after us'? (Willard, Divine Conspiracy, p.67)

Spiritual Tool for the Week

The following exercise is to be done this week. Record your experiences in the spaces below.

Spiritual Tool: A Study Sweep of Scripture. Take Jim Smith’s hint (Embracing, pp 116-117) and read through the Gospel of Mark with a highlighter, underlining every VERB that reflects something Jesus did. We are looking for hints of what God is like, looking at Jesus’ life for our clues. (John 14.9)

For example in the following passages you might underline the following verb, and then reflect on what they tell you about God.

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opening and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days, being tempted by Satan. And he was with the wild animals, and the angels were ministering to him.

Mk 1:9-13 (ESV)

Reflections on your experience

Readings for Dec 3

Read "Embracing...", Chapters 7-8 and answer the following questions.

1. Jim highlights God's provision (Embracing, pp 117-119 & 121-123) and his presence (pp 119-121) as key components of God's care. Does God care for you in these ways?

2. Have you ever kept a prayer journal (p. 118)? What has been the result?

3. What are some parts of who we are that need our care (pp. 132-138)?

4. What 6 exercises of abstinence and engagement does Jim recommend (pp. 139-141)?

5. What do you think of Jim's description of an average day lived with care for yourself and of his "Life is too short to..." list (pp. 142-144)?
