

Sacred Joy

God is joy. This would surprise some of us who picture God as a scolding, old man, wagging his finger with consternation. Isn't this the same God that gave the Hebrews more than 600 laws to obey. Isn't this the same God who was constantly berating the Hebrews with, "Thou shalt not do this and thou shalt not do that"? We must remember, however, that God's chosen people did not start out as a well-organized nation. Their existence began as a loose coalition of clans and tribes. We are not exactly talking law and order here. God had to set rules of discipline and boundaries for his children, just as we do for ours, in order that they might live a good life. The nation of Israel often lost its way, but those in relationship with God always experienced great joy. The experience of God is described in terms of joy 35 times in the book of Psalms alone. We see people singing, dancing, playing music, and shouting with great joy. When King David was able to bring the "Ark of God" to the City of David, he "danced before the Lord with all his might, while he and the entire house of Israel brought up the ark of the Lord with shouts and the sound of trumpets". He is described as "leaping and dancing before the Lord". David did not care who saw him. He couldn't help himself. He had to express his joy, the joy experienced as one's heart burns with the love of God. The joy everyone experiences when they have a close relationship with him.

We also experience God's joy through Jesus. There is great rejoicing at his birth. He was born in a dirty stable and laid in a feeding trough; no comforts of life here, yet angels, shepherds, and Magi celebrated. There was great joy at his baptism as the voice of God declared, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." There was great joy as sight was restored to the blind and lame people walked; great joy when a leper was restored to his community; great joy when thieves, adulterers, and prostitutes were transformed; great joy when the dead were given new life. There was even a moment of joy on the cross as a criminal hanging next to Jesus repents. Jesus tells us through the parables of the lost son, lost coin, and lost sheep of the great joy God experiences when even one person's relationship is restored with him.

It is important to establish the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is observing or doing something in the world that you like, that makes you feel good. It is dependent upon external conditions and circumstances. It is transient in nature, coming and going all the time. You purchase a new car and feel happy. The car is involved in an accident, and you are sad. You take a vacation and are happy. You return to a difficult job and are miserable. On the other hand, joy is connecting with the source of life, the spirit of God that is within you. It is an inner exuberance that comes from an authentic relationship with God. Joy emerges from a deep sense that you are living out your meaning and purpose in life and that you are making a difference in the world. Great joy develops from knowing that you are helping to bring God's presence into the lives of others. We don't acquire joy as a result of getting something we don't have, but rather recognizing and appreciating what we do have, God's unconditional acceptance. Jesus refers to this as he says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." (John 15:9-11)

All parents have seen pure joy in the eyes of their children who know they are unconditionally loved. If you deliver meals to an impoverished neighborhood, ultimately you will have a child run up and embrace you, a complete stranger. They look up into your eyes with a plea, "Love me. Help me. Want me. Need me." This longing is a need that never leaves us. God in his infinite grace tells us, "I love you no matter what. You are always precious to me, even when you lose your way. I need you to fulfill my plan for the world, to bring my presence into the lives of others." This is why those who have a genuine relationship with God feel an inner joy that is independent of the events of life. It is why the apostle Paul states, "for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be a need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength." These words were written to the Philippians from prison. Paul's letter to the Philippians is largely considered his treatise on joy. The concept of rejoicing or joy appears 16 times in this letter. What, you might ask, is so joyful about prison? Paul's situation or circumstances could not dictate the joy he experienced. Whatever the circumstances, Paul had a quiet, confident assurance that God's love would work in his life, and be there no matter what circumstances ensued.

This abiding presence of sacred joy is not acquired overnight. It requires a change in how we relate to God. It requires a change of heart. Most of us are "control freaks". We want to determine the direction of our life. It's okay for God to be a copilot, but we don't really want him at the wheel. Loss of control creates too much fear and anxiety. We feel vulnerable. The only way to overcome this, is to work on the intimacy of our relationship with God. This is why the marks of discipleship are so important. As discussed elsewhere in this book, we gradually establish a connectedness with God through prayer, scripture, worship, Christian fellowship, and service. We begin to sense his presence alongside and within us. We begin to trust him enough to follow his guidance. His will directs our instincts. We gradually become more willing to follow his way as taught to us by Jesus through the Gospels. When we submit ourselves to living our lives as Jesus has taught, we experience joy and peace that cannot be shaken by circumstances. As we truly accept his forgiveness and begin to forgive others, a great burden is lifted from our shoulders. We find greater affirmation by becoming less self-centered and more other-centered. We rejoice in serving others as we discover that this brings a bliss never found by serving oneself. We discover the joy of living in Christian fellowship with those that recognize their abundance, are grateful for it, and generous in sharing. As we discern our God-given gifts and apply them to God's purpose in the world, we acquire a strength of conviction and sense of direction previously missing.

Allowing God to transform us results in genuine joy. The more we allow God to change us, the greater our joy will be. As we progress in our spiritual growth, our faith allows us to place our trust in God, allowing him to provide our direction. Many experiences in life can provide happiness, but only God provides true joy. We see this in people of great faith. They are more optimistic than most of us because they can see God working in their life, even during times of turmoil and stress. Their problems aren't any different, but they radiate unshakable peace. The delight in knowing God intimately is apparent in their eyes and their actions. It is this joy that Jesus radiated. It is this joy that prompted Paul and Silas to fill their prison cell with

songs of praise to Jesus. It is this joy that inspired Paul to proclaim to the Philippians, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"