

Ecclesiastes 2:24-26

²⁴ There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God; ²⁵for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment? ²⁶For to the one who pleases him God gives wisdom and knowledge and joy; but to the sinner he gives the work of gathering and heaping, only to give to one who pleases God. This also is vanity and a chasing after wind.

1 Timothy 6:17-19

¹⁷ As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. ¹⁸They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, ¹⁹thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

John 15:6-11

⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.



O WHAT JOY!

Arlene had asked that I include that song, "I've Got the Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy, Down in My Heart." It seems to me that many Christians have that joy so far down in their hearts that it's

undetectable. The fact is that many Christians have a lot of conflict with regard to joy. They see a division between “the world” and themselves and thus are very careful not to find joy in anything too “worldly” for fear that their minds may be contaminated. They will listen exclusively to “Christian” music, watch “Christian” movies, read “Christian” books, and attend “Christian” events, and while there is nothing wrong with the music or movies or books or events, their perspective is often skewed, and they have a hard time being objective; They give rave reviews to all the “Christian” activities and books and movies they see while dismissing the non-Christian as flawed or dangerous or evil simply due to the fact that it doesn’t have the Christian logo stamped on it. They fear the influence that anything non “Christian” may have on them; what’s worse is that they may judge anyone who crosses that threshold into the secular realm as being “too worldly” much the way the Pharisees criticized Jesus for being too worldly by dining with tax collectors and “sinners,” by breaking the Sabbath laws and by not fasting when it seemed appropriate to do so. Those who confine themselves to these Christian quarters are usually not the sort of people I characterize as *joyful*. They may put on a good act; they may have a bright smile and a gleam in their eyes. They may be very cheerful and friendly, but I sense in them a fear of not complying to a code of conduct that defines what in their own minds a Christian is supposed to be.

This is what drove me away from a Christian organization at my university campus during my undergraduate years. There seemed to be plenty of joy – lots of smiles and handshakes – and no doubt there were Christians there who knew the joy of the Lord. But certain topics were avoided, and certain ideas were considered dangerous and demonic. I found no joy there because I felt suffocated. I could not entertain thoughts that fell outside of the orthodoxy that this group insisted upon, and in the end I said to myself, “If this is what a Christian is, I’m going to have to find my peace with God in some other way.”

And so I sought out a less restrictive Christian environment, but I did not find my joy there either. The church group that I started to hang out with also had a conflicted relationship with the world; they weren’t compulsive about doing all the “Christian” things – though they went to church and hung out together - but they also had trouble dealing with “the world.” They were masochistic in a way; they went to frat parties and bars and watched raunchy movies, then spend the next few days with a burden of guilt on their shoulders. They had no reservations about dining with the tax collectors and sinners, but then they’d regret it the next day and punish themselves with shame. “Oh Lord, I have gone astray once again. I am not worthy. Forgive me my trespasses.” I don’t characterize these people as very joyful either.

Sadly there are quite a few people in churches who fall into either of those categories, who are so afraid of doing anything wrong that they can’t find peace and certainly can’t find joy either.

The truth of the matter is that true joy is not possible with God alone. Let me say that again: true joy is not possible with God alone. And I believe that God designed it that way. You see, you and I experience our greatest joy in loving relationship with one another. Usually it’s our

relationship with our spouse or our parents or our children. But the suffering and death of those we love cause us to suffer as well. It's like you can't have one without the other; those who love the most experience the greatest joy and the greatest pain. If we numb ourselves to emotion and feel no suffering or pain, we also render ourselves incapable of loving. Dare I say that the more we resemble our Creator the more we suffer AND the more we rejoice.

We can't be joyful without suffering, but we can endure the suffering if we can maintain faith that joy will somehow carry the day. Today I want to give you some direction that will help you persevere through suffering and hopefully find some authentic joy in your life. Let me explain.

Suffering should drive us to pray, and prayer should draw us closer to God, and the only chance we have of finding any semblance of joy will come from that relationship with God. Everything else is transient. And there are two things about God that should help you find joy and maintain joy as long as you maintain a relationship with God.

The two words that come to my mind when one is asked to describe God are LOVE and LIFE. Let me start with LIFE: Paul Tillich describes God as "the ground of all being." Anything that *is* comes from God, and we know that we *are* because we are alive, so life itself is the greatest gift from God. My observations have been that nearly every human being strives to live, or **to be** as Hamlet would put it. Even those who are suicidal, who would choose "not to be" often hold some hope of a new life after death. Christians and people of other religions usually count on something better in the next life as they should, *because if we are God's creations and God is "the ground of all being" our hope is for life that never ends in fellowship with a God who never dies.*

And this is where the love comes into play. God didn't have to create us or anything else, but since love is God's greatest attribute he created everything. Out of love, God created those who he wished to love. Since love involves free will, we have the choice of loving God or not loving God. Of course God has the same choice, but scripture tells us and Jesus proves to us that God has chosen to love us perfectly and eternally.

So when in faith we can believe with our whole heart that God is the ground of being that never stops being, and that we have been created in his image to 'be' forever in his loving care, we can finally live the way our loving God would like us to live: JOYFULLY. The challenge lies in holding this faith when our hearts are broken out of love for those who suffer and die. God gives us this capacity to love one another, then he breaks our hearts. All because we are created in his image.

To me, the only way I can love God is if I believe that there is life after death, because if those I love and who love me are taken forever by death I could not presume that God cared. If he loves he restores us with those we love in order that our joy may return to us.

And so we MUST cling to our faith – that the eternal God created us out of **love** in order to love others, not that our hearts would be broken forever but that our love would be fulfilled, that we would once again be with those we love and with the One who makes both life and love possible.

Christians are grounded in the reality of this world, just as Jesus was grounded in the realities of this world. He knew suffering, as did those who loved him and watched him die an early and hideous death. Our faith is grounded in the Resurrection, in the knowledge that death does not have the final word for any of us. As we struggle in our lives, loving and suffering, may we find some joy through faith that God loves us so much that he will not let death have the final say, that we will have life eternal, and that our joy will be complete.