

A Season Of Joy: PERSPECTIVE

Philippians 4:4-9

A proper perspective helps us feel joy.

A sermon preached by
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I don't know how many times over the years I have sat with someone who is in the midst of some traumatic experience in life and heard them say, "I just want to be happy." Or if they have been struggling for a while, they say, "I just want to be happy again." Or a parent has a child who is struggling with immense difficulties, and they tell me, "I just want him (or her) to be happy." There is a universal desire for joy.

Living joyfully is hard in today's world. Maybe it has always been. On a daily basis we confront the difficulties of war, climate change, pandemic disease, inflation, grief, divorce, loneliness, just to name a few. Some days it's hard to get up and put a smile on your face. How can we get happy and stay that way? How do we find joy in a world full of trouble?

A year or so ago Carey bought a book for her book club that caught my eye. It is called *The Book of Joy*.¹ That immediately piqued my interest. Then Carey said, "You have to read this!" I read a little bit of it and thought immediately, "That will preach!" The book is about a visit Archbishop Desmond Tutu made to see the Dalai Lama, on the occasion of the Dalai Lama's 80th birthday. They shared a week of conversations about the meaning of joy, and this book is full of their insights. Both of these spiritual leaders are known for their joyful outlook on life, but both have been subjected to significant suffering along the way.

The Dalai Lama is the head of the Tibetan people and Tibetan Buddhism. He is thought to be the reincarnation of a long line of Dalai Lamas, and is the incarnation of the spirit of compassion. At the age of 2, he was taken away from his parents and raised by Buddhist monks, in preparation for his role of political and spiritual leadership. When China invaded Tibet in 1950, he tried to balance civil war and political negotiations, but in 1959, faced with the massacre of his people, the Dalai Lama went into exile, and Tibet was annexed. Since then, he has lived in exile and traveled the world teaching.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu was the head of the Anglican Church in South Africa. As a young priest, he was outspoken in his criticism of the racist *apartheid* regime. Violence

and persecution were a daily occurrence. When *apartheid* fell, Tutu's good friend Nelson Mandela, the first Black President of South Africa, asked him to chair the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which held the racists accountable, yet without revenge or retribution. In his last 20 years of life, Tutu traveled the world as a spokesman for human rights, understanding, love, and peace.

Both spiritual leaders received the Nobel Peace Prize for their work. Despite all they suffered, both men exhibited a remarkable joy in life. Their conversations were peppered with laughter and joking. They were fun to be around.

So for the next eight weeks, we are going to listen to the insights of the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu as they discuss what it means to have joy in the midst of trouble. What we will find is that joy is deeper than mere happiness or pleasure. Those experiences are based on external situations, but joy is an internal compass that is not dependent on external circumstances. Joy can be emotional, but it is more than an emotion. Joy is a mental and spiritual attitude. Joy leads to action. Joy is not a solitary state, but a communal relationship. And joy is catching; it is contagious, spreading from one person to another like a positive virus. The Archbishop said our goal in life is "to be a reservoir of joy, and oasis of peace, a pool of serenity that can ripple out to all those around you."² That's what we want to learn over the next eight weeks.

Each week we will look at an impediment to joy, a pillar of joy, and a practice of joy—what keeps us from joy, what establishes us in joy, and how we can learn to be more joyful.

The first impediment to joy is fear, stress, and anxiety. That should be no surprise. Nothing robs us of joy like fear, stress, and anxiety. We just feel overwhelmed by the events swirling around us, the pace of change, the uncertainty of the future.

One would think that if anything would bring joy, it would be a national football championship. But even that can be a source of stress and anxiety. Urban Meyer was the coach of the Florida Gators in 2008 when they won the NCAA national championship. But he couldn't even enjoy the celebration. Within minutes of the victory, Meyer had closed himself off in an office to make recruiting calls for the next year's team. He said, "I was in a panic situation. We just won it. We got to do it again. I closed the door. And I started just recruiting. One of my friends came and said, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'Enjoy, what's wrong with you, man? Enjoy this.' I tried."³ Before the year was over, Meyer had taken a medical leave of absence due to chest pains caused by anxiety.

Fear, stress, and anxiety rob us of joy because they are centered on self. Joy comes when you take the focus off of self and direct your attention to others. We want to shift our perspective from focusing on "I, me, and mine" to "we, us, and ours." Psychologists have done studies that show that the more people use the first-person singular pronouns—I, me, mine—the more likely they are to be depressed. People who use more first-person plural pronouns—we, us, ours—tend to be happier.⁴

Paul talks about the need to let go of fear, stress, and anxiety in our Scripture text today: "*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*"⁵

Releasing the power of fear, stress, and anxiety, we build our joy on the pillar of **PERSPECTIVE**. That's the first of the eight pillars of joy. We can develop a healthier, happier perspective when we reframe the stress in our lives not as a threat, but as a challenge. Look at the trouble in your life as an obstacle to be overcome. It's hard and it's

hurtful sometimes, but that challenge is an avenue for growth, a highway to health, a pathway to joy.

The Dalai Lama and Archbishop Tutu suggest developing your perspective in three directions. There's a wider perspective. Look around you. There are people in the same situation as you are. There are people in worse shape than you are. There are probably more people in worse shape than in better shape than you are. Think about these folks. Develop compassion for their trouble, and you will find your own fear, stress, and anxiety dissolving away.

A second perspective is the longer perspective. Think about your troubles on the long scale of time. Many times your problems have been a long time coming, or as you think of the past, you can remember how you had this problem before and dealt with it. Looking ahead, it is unlikely that your trouble is going to last forever. It will be over, or it will be better, in the near future. Think about what your situation could be in a year or five or ten. There's more to your life than the moment.

The third perspective is what the Archbishop calls "the God's-eye perspective."⁶ Take your mind up about 30,000 feet and get a bigger picture of what's happening. Think about the resources of faith to deal with your problems. Know that God is with you and will never let you go. This higher perspective is like the astronauts who went to the moon. They reported that once they saw the earth from that perspective, the big blue ball floating in space without the human-made borders, they never looked at life quite the same again.

Developing perspective means reframing your life. Reframe what's going on. Get a wider, longer, and higher perspective, and you can expect certain things to happen. You will have more courage to face your problems. You will feel the connection you have with God and all God's creatures and all God's children. You will find a calmness because your trouble is not so overwhelming any more. And you will lose the need to control everything. In fact, you will see that you can't control everything, and that will lead to humility, which is next week's pillar of joy.

Lee Horton developed a new perspective because of some deep trouble in his life. Lee and his brother Dennis were convicted of robbery and murder and sentenced to life in prison. But after 27 years, the verdict was reversed, and they walked free. The first thing Lee noticed was that he was riding in a car without handcuffs on. For 27 years, he had never been in a car without handcuffs.

Lee and Dennis went to the DMV to get their driver's licenses renewed. And it was a wonderful experience! They were free to sit and wait without constraint for their turn at one of our basic civic freedoms. Lee said the people couldn't figure out why he and his brother were having such a good time.

Lee Horton told NPR: "I was in awe of everything around me. It's like my mind was just heightened to every small nuance. Just to be able to just look out of a window, just to walk down a street and just inhale the fresh air, just to see people interacting. ... It woke something up in me, something that I don't know if it died or if it went to sleep. I've been having epiphanies every single day since I've been released."⁷

Reframing our troubles and gaining a new perspective is not always easy or simple, but it is an essential step toward a deep, internal sense of joy. It's not impossible. There are three good reasons why a new perspective is possible.

Number one: God. God is large and in charge. God is the Creator of the Universe. God runs the show. And God is good. Joy is in God's plan for every single life, and God

is constantly at work to bring understanding out of confusion, reconciliation out of estrangement, growth out of pain, and good out of evil. I told you last week that we were through with Romans for a while, but I can't let this verse go unmentioned, because it's what God does to help us reframe: "*We know that in all things God works for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose.*"⁸

Number two: We can reframe our perspective because Jesus turned the worst trouble into the greatest day in human history. Jesus was a master reframer. He could make a parable out of anything—the birds of the air, a mustard seed, a cranky old woman. He healed the sick and raised the dead. He could turn someone like a prostitute or a tax collector into a disciple. And in the end he was killed. But God took that tragic death on the cross and reframed it into the key event in the salvation of the world. Three days later, Jesus walked out of the tomb, and evil, sin, and death were defeated. The grief of the women and disciples was turned to joy. If God can take a crucifixion and turn it into a resurrection, we can change our perspective on our little troubles.

Finally, a new perspective is possible because we have the support of a community. Joy is a communal experience. If you're having a great day, don't you just have to share it with somebody? We are not alone on this journey. Archbishop Tutu talked about the African concept of *ubuntu*. It can mean "community" or "humanity," but it is deeper than those words. *Ubuntu* means "I am because you are," or "A person is a person through other persons." We derive our identity through relationships. Then, our human interconnectedness connects us to God. Tutu says, "This God is community, fellowship. Being created by this God, we are created in order to flourish. And we flourish in community. When we become self-centered, turning in on ourselves, as sure as anything, we are going to find one day a deep, *deep* frustration."⁹

So what are some practices that we can do to increase our joy? Today we are going to start simply. In order to relieve fear, stress, and anxiety, breathe. Get into a quiet place, sit comfortably, maybe put your hands palms up on your thighs. Breathe in through your nose, and fill up the bottom of your lungs first. It's like a jug of water filling up from the bottom up.

While you are breathing, you can try to empty your mind of worried thoughts. You can think "in" when you inhale and "out" when you exhale. You can count the number of breaths you take; the book suggests at least five.

A historic practice is to fill your breathing with a simple prayer. The "breath prayer" can be thought or said when you inhale: "Lord, Jesus Christ, Son of God, give me grace (peace, strength, joy, hope)."

Try this practice as you seek to find joy in your life. And find it you will. If you feel overwhelmed by the trouble in your life, you can find a way to overcome. You can reframe your experience with a wider, longer, or higher perspective. In every moment you can know: you are not alone. You are *ubuntu*, made for community. You are saved by the Master Reframer, Jesus Christ. You are a child of the God who sees you and knows you and loves you. It's all good. Thanks be to God.

¹ The Dalai Lama, Desmond Tutu, and Douglas Abrams, *The Book Of Joy* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2016).

² *Ibid.*, 63.

³ Brett McMurphy, “Meyer: ‘I thought I was dying’ in ‘09,” ESPN (9-20-14).

⁴ *Book of Joy*, 199f.

⁵ Philippians 4:6-7.

⁶ *Book of Joy*, 199.

⁷ Sally Hershops, “Lee Horton Reflects On Coming Home After Years In Prison,” NPR Weekend Edition (4-11-21).

⁸ Romans 8:28.

⁹ *Book of Joy*, 62.