

## QUESTION #14: “WHAT IS JOY?” (Psalm 23)

8.25.19

### INTRODUCTION

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” Many of us probably remember hearing those words growing up in school when learning about the formation of the United States and our revolutionary separation from England. Those words, found in the opening lines of our Declaration of Independence, have been called “one of the best-known sentences in the English language,” and are said to contain “the most potent and consequential words in American history.” But what exactly do those words mean, “the pursuit of happiness?” What does that look like? What is happiness? What is joy? Seems like a basic enough question — but actually acquiring it, having it, knowing it, that seems to be another matter. For something that seems so simple, why is it so difficult, and why do many people spend their entire lives looking for it?

It seems to be a very relevant question, certainly in our society according to recent polls. In a survey from March 2019, the United States only ranked 19<sup>th</sup> in the world in an international glimpse of happiness, ranked behind, among others, Canada (9<sup>th</sup>), Costa Rica (12<sup>th</sup>) and Israel (13<sup>th</sup>); even the United Kingdom, for all their issues and challenges (think Brexit) came in ahead of us as well (15<sup>th</sup>), as did Ireland, Germany and Belgium, along with three Scandinavian nations — Finland, Denmark and Norway — those last three, incidentally, leading the list. What was particularly interesting was that, in considering all the other factors the poll-takers looked at in evaluating happiness (life expectancy, social support, freedom to make choices, the generosity of people around you, and perceived corruption levels), economics was actually a very small part of what factored into the final results. Even as income levels rise, our national happiness does not. In fact, it was an economist, Jeffrey Sachs, one of the authors of the study, who noted: “America’s crisis is, in short, a social crisis, not an economic crisis. Almost all of the policy discourse in Washington, D.C. centers on naïve attempts to raise the economic growth rate, as if a higher growth rate would somehow heal the deepening divisions and angst in American society.” He went on to observe that America’s public health has markedly declined, due to epidemics in obesity, substance abuse (particularly addiction) and depression (marked by an ongoing increase in the national suicide rate), to the point that the life expectancy of citizens in the United States is actually decreasing. In fact, the study authors pointed to an increase in addictive behaviors in general — including gambling, social media usage, and risky sexual behavior — as all combining to make happiness for Americans more elusive than ever.

With all that as backdrop, “What is joy” is the question we’re going to be looking at today — and we’re going to be doing that through a couple of Scriptural filters — the primary one being one of the great chapters in all of Scripture: the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

### TEXT

***The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever — David, Psalm 23.***

### ANALYSIS

Satan, Lucifer, the devil — whatever name you call him, he is known for one major, massive skill: deception. He is the greatest deceiver of all time. From the time of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he has made his mark by lying regarding all that God has said, and at the same time making his own words seem like the truth, and therefore casting God’s words as the ones to be doubted. Certainly Jesus had it right when he described Satan like this: **“[The devil] was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies”** — *Jesus Christ, John 8:44b*.

Yet as accurately harsh as that description of Satan is, we cannot forget one other way that Satan is described in Scriptures, and that picture is given us by the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthian Christians: ***Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light*** — *Paul, II Corinthians 11:14*. In other words, even while Satan is destroying life with his lies (justifying Christ’s portrayal of him as a “murderer”), he is doing it with a smile on his face and an easy, disarming manner of speaking his temptations. He makes his ideas look great — which brings us to the second Scripture we are going to be using as a filter when talking about joy, and it is these words from the OT book of Proverbs: ***There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death*** — *Proverbs 14:12*

So let’s look at the first half of that verse from Proverbs: ***There is a way that appears to be right*** — *Proverbs 14:12a*. Pretty good, huh? God has given mankind everything necessary for a great life, but Satan’s ideas somehow still have the ability to appear to be right, in fact, to be the greatest thing since sliced bread, and that rightness can wind up flirting with us — whether we’re a nonbeliever, or whether we’ve been a Christian for 50 years or 50 minutes.

Now just so that we are not kidding ourselves, what often determines the path we think is going to result in joy we are so desperate to find is very simply determined by a “t” word — trust. How we proceed in life— our thoughts, our logic and our ultimate choices — all are dependent on whose word we are going to trust, no matter the situation — Satan’s word or God’s. Now we all know that Jesus said: ***[A]part from me you can do nothing*** — *Jesus Christ, John 15:5b*. But then we often add to those words by mixing some of our own ideas: I’m sure Jesus must understand how attractive this is, or desirable, or useful, or necessary . . . or whatever. So even as we know, or claim to know, the words of Jesus, so many people — believers and nonbelievers alike — keep trying to find their own way to joy. Why? I think pastor and author John Piper maybe sums it up best: “There is only one basic reason why we disobey the commands of Jesus: It’s because we don’t have heartfelt confidence that obeying will bring more blessing than disobeying. We do not fully hope in God’s promise” — John Piper, *The Power Of Hope*. So because of unbelief, because it is believed that there is no one way that obeying God can provide more joy than our own efforts, because we simply do not trust what God has said we can, efforts doomed to fail still continue. It is, of course, one of the great definitions of “insanity”: Doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result. That would be mankind.

Now, for the bulk of the world, joy is nothing but a mirage — a momentary flash of time that seems to offer so much but disappears so quickly. Biblically, life is most often defined as a mist or a shadow — here one moment, gone the next. If that’s how an entire lifetime is defined, how tiny must a moment be? In fact, if we look at our culture, you can see just how deceived this culture is. It was actually a guy named Zophar, one of Job’s “friends” who came to get Job back on the “straight-and-narrow,” who nailed it regarding the success of man trying to find joy and happiness on his own efforts: ***Surely you know how it has been from of old, ever since mankind was place on the earth, that the mirth of the wicked is brief, the joy of the godless lasts but a moment*** — *Zophar, Job 20:4-5*. Considering that Job is thought to have lived somewhat contemporary to the life of Abraham (2166-1991 BC, some 2100 years before the life of Christ), this does shine an incredibly bright light

on some of Solomon's words of wisdom from the book of Ecclesiastes: ***What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun — Solomon, Ecclesiastes 1:9.*** The point? Anything tried in our own efforts will amount to nothing and, if we bothered to look, we would see pretty much the entire history of the human race focused on repeatedly trying being happy from the consequence of their own human cleverness, strength and determination. The only result we've ever seen? Failure. Here are some ways that the culture has staked its lives (often quite literally) and continued to seek joy despite the truths of Scripture:

- 1) Lifestyle (including same-sex relationships and cohabitation):
  - a) ***Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed be kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral — Hebrews 13:4.***
  - b) ***Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming — Paul, Colossians 3:5-6.***
  - c) ***Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies — Paul, I Corinthians 6:18-20.***
- 2) Greed (prosperity gospel). Our culture's devotion to things and riches as a means both of measuring success and of being happy has even found a niche in theology: the "prosperity gospel" — that teaches that, the stronger our faith, the more we can expect riches and glory and satisfaction in this life. The disciples struggled with that too. What does Scripture teach?
  - a) ***Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from evil. . . . A wicked person earns deceptive wages, but the one who sows righteousness reaps a sure reward — Proverbs 11:4, 18.***
  - b) ***“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also — Jesus Christ, the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:19-21.***
  - c) ***Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you” — Hebrews 13:5 (quoting Deuteronomy 31:6).***
- 3) Accomplishment (career): ***Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever — I John 2:15-17.***
- 4) Love (desire to be physically attractive)
  - a) ***Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should bear that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight — I Peter 3:3-4.***
  - b) ***“Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart” — God speaking, I Samuel 16:7.***
- 5) Mind-altering (alcohol/drugs)

- a) ***The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God — Paul, Galatians 5:19-21.*** Whenever the Bible discusses the topics of “witchcraft” or “sorcery,” the use of mind-altering drugs is implied, as they have been a part of those lifestyles since the Egypt of the pharaohs.
- b) ***You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound — David, Psalm 4:7 (ESV).***

All of these efforts are doomed to fail — guaranteed. Why? The Bible says so. ***[God] has also set eternity in the human heart — Solomon, Ecclesiastes 3:11a.*** You see, God “hard-wired” us to realize that there is something else, Someone Else, beyond ourselves. This world is NOT all there is. But since God created the “hole,” God is the only one who can fill it. The problem for the world is that the world sees Christianity as just another religion — not the God-desired relationship that it is meant to be. Therefore the commands that are a part of the life in Christ are simply seen as “rules and regulations,” not as opportunities to reflect our love for him by obedience to him — all within a relationship with him. In addition, God gave his laws and commands as a picture of his love for man, sharing his words to let us know that in his laws beat the heart of a Father completely intent on the best for us. That’s why David was inspired to write: ***The law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The decrees of the Lord are firm, and all of them are righteous — David, Psalm 19:7-9.*** In fact, one of the very oldest ideas of the joyful consequence of obedience came to us from God all the way back in Exodus 19, when he was talking with Moses: ***“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession” — God speaking to Moses, Exodus 19:5.*** The psalmist realized that joy, writing in Psalm 112: ***Blessed are those who fear the Lord, who find great delight in his commands — Psalm 112:1.*** In fact, one day, according to the minor OT prophet Zephaniah: ***[The Lord your God] will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing — Zephaniah 3:17b.*** And in the NT, it was the apostle James who said: ***[W]hoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues in it — not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it — they will be blessed in what they do — James 1:25.*** On the contrary, what do the Scriptures say about those who insist on living their own way, trying to find joy by their own means? The psalmist tells it simply: ***[T]he way of the wicked leads to destruction. . . . [T]he longings of the wicked will come to nothing — Psalm 1:6b, 112:10b.***

So — how can we communicate that? How can we share the life of joy that we claim to know — including understanding our obedience to being a huge part of our joy? Certainly not with feelings or emotions, and certainly not by leaving us to our own devices. So let’s get back to Psalm 23 to consider words that describes some of the bases we can claim for biblical joy. There are some simple yet incredibly profound points that this psalm makes clear, but those points don’t matter until they are understood to be spoken from the perspective of the sheep, a member of the flock. For this sheep (which is how David is seeing himself), the Lord rules as the shepherd. It is not up for debate — but that is the joy that he has found. The beauty of this psalm is revealed in all that we can know precisely because of that fact, because the Lord is the shepherd:

- 1) Because the Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing: He meets all my needs day by every day, and even watches over me when I am in need of rest. The Lord even sacrificed his “one and only Son” that my greatest need — salvation — could also be met:

- a) *He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? — Paul, Romans 8:32.*
  - b) *[M]y God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus — Paul, Philippians 4:19.*
- 2) Because the Lord is my shepherd, my protection is assured because I am never left alone — even if that means having to be in dangerous or difficult places. As a sheep in his flock, I will never not know his presence. As David wrote so eloquently: *Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast. If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,” even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you — David, Psalm 139:7-12.* So what does that mean for us?
- a) *“[T]ake heart! I have overcome the world” — Jesus Christ, John 16:33b.* Hear that? “I have overcome” — it has already happened. Not a future hope, but a present reality.
  - b) *What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? — Paul, Romans 8:31.*
- 3) Because the Lord is my shepherd, my eternity is guaranteed — forever guaranteed:
- a) *“My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” — Jesus Christ, John 14:2-3.*
  - b) *“[S]urely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 28:20b.*
  - c) And because eternity means that most of the life I am going to live is ahead of me, far beyond any life I am living now (the Bible most often views the length of life on earth through the filter of eternity), I now understand what Paul wrote in his second letter to the church at Corinth: *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal — Paul, II Corinthians 4:16-18.*

Because of all these facts, these realities, David can know and claim the joy that God has always intended for those who love him. As the writer celebrated in Psalm 33: *In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name — Psalm 33:20-22.* But the hook is being content, even eager, to live as a lamb in the Shepherd’s flock, under the Good Shepherd’s care. It is one of the great promises of God that life will never be better than being a lamb in his flock. As Isaiah acknowledged: *[The Sovereign Lord] tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young — Isaiah 40:11,* foreshadowing the role that Jesus himself would play: *“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” — Jesus Christ, John 10:11.*

What does that mean? James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, a half-brother of Jesus and the writer of the epistle that bears his name, said it so well: *Consider it pure joy (KJV: “Count it all joy”), my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance — James 1:2-3.* What he is saying that, we can count everything in our lives as joy when that life is founded in Jesus Christ — which means we can count tribulations as joy; we can count taking up our cross as joy; we can count suffering as joy; in fact, we

can forsake everything for the incomparable joy found in the life of Jesus Christ — which is exactly what Paul said: *[W]hatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth (KJV: “excellency”) of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage (KJV: “dung”), that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ — the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ — Paul, Philippians 3:7-10a.*

And how can we do that? How can we find joy in all those things, things to which the world would turn its head, plug its nose and run away? It is one fundamental truth: Life lived in Jesus Christ — that’s the joy. Knowing absolute freedom from sin — that’s the joy. Obeying him — that’s the joy. Trusting him, being content with his seeing outcomes that glorify him that we could not possibly see — that’s the joy. Embracing our own helplessness — that’s the joy. That is the joy we can claim when we have surrendered our lives to God through his Son Jesus Christ. Those are not hopes; those are not “pipe dreams.” Those are Scripturally-based, absolutely true promises founded on the love and power of God.

“Watching a loved one in pain” — the world’s worst spectator sport. So how do we find joy in that circumstance?

## CONCLUSION

So let’s go back to that “t”-word thing: Do we trust him? Do we honestly believe that all God says, that all God promises, is true? Paul said it this way to the Roman church: *Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey — whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness — Paul, Romans 6:16-18.*

And what about us — this church? The Bible preaches not only to individuals but to the community, the body of believers, as well. On what are we basing our joy as that body of believers? The chorus of an old gospel hymn brings us both the challenge and the path forward: *Trust and obey for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus but to trust and obey.* Is that where we find our joy?

Joy, meaning joy that will last, is available to each and every one of us — found only in the reassuring hands of the Lord Jesus Christ. In whose hands have you placed your life? Let’s pray!