

FINDING CHRIST'S JOY

By Andrew Wilson
February 19, 2012

Proverbs 2:1-11, 20-21
Romans 8:28-30

One of the recurring themes in my preaching is joy. That theme has motivated and animated me as a pastor for three reasons.

First, Jesus makes it abundantly clear that he wants us to be joyful. In the darkest time of his life – on the night of his betrayal, just before his crucifixion – Jesus prays for his followers. He asks that the Father would grant them “the full measure of his [- that is of Christ’s -] joy within them” (John 17:13). He tells his disciples on that same night, “Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy” (John 16:22).

I’ve focused on joy, secondly, because so few people believe that joy is within reach. They believe, instead, that joy comes to us – if it comes at all – only sporadically, and that we should accept unhappiness and discontent as normal states of being.

I’ve focused on joy, thirdly, because few people actually live with joy. Few people have achieved the kind of enduring happiness and contentment that characterized the New Testament Apostles. Most people, instead, are perpetually unhappy and chronically dissatisfied with *who* they are and *where* they are in life.

When I think about the messages I’ve offered, I realize that there are two different ways we can approach the subject of joy. And we see both on display in the Bible. The first approach focuses on *us*. The strategy is to examine our behavior, our motivations, our priorities, our attitudes and our values, and to ask: what changes need to take place if we want to have Christ’s joy inside us? Most of the Biblical teaching that relates to joy, happiness and contentment come at the subject from this perspective.

Many important truths emerge when we examine ourselves, but there are two that stand out. There are two that are inescapable to a wise person. These two truths dominate not only the Bible, but also the writings of the world’s greatest teachers.

The first truth is that joy, happiness and contentment can’t be derived from the things of the world. They aren’t the result of being lucky, or finding yourself in the right set of circumstances. Rather, they’re states of being that are somehow dependent on *us*.

The second, related truth is that it’s actually an achievement to be joyful, happy and content. It’s an achievement that’s made possible by the Holy Spirit. God brings about those wonderful states of being by making us virtuous. He instills in us qualities of character that enable us to fulfill his dream for us, which is that we would grow to resemble Jesus. That’s why it makes sense to speak of our joy, happiness and contentment as both a personal achievement, and a gift of God’s grace.

If the first approach to the subject of joy, happiness and contentment focuses on *us*, what does the second approach focus on? It focuses on *God and our relationship to him*. And it’s this second, more theological approach that Paul takes in the eighth chapter of his letter to the Romans. Paul’s goal is to show us that joy, happiness and contentment are not out of reach, but rather are the normal, natural states of existence for Christians. And Paul’s strategy is to shine a light on God’s character, and on his wonderful, mysterious work in our lives.

Paul's message is complex. He makes five different points relating to suffering and joy. Each point is distinct. We could easily spend the rest of our time focusing only on one or two of them, but the core of his message emerges only if we follow the argument from beginning to end. So then, let's walk through the five points so we can discover the beautiful coherence and deep relevance of Paul's teaching.

Point number one is that Christians aren't sheltered from suffering and evil.

Paul writes, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him..." (Romans 8:28). But just before he makes that hope-filled declaration, Paul acknowledges the intense suffering that he and his churches have had to endure. They live in a world that's "subjected to frustration" and is in bondage to death and decay. They're vulnerable to sickness, loneliness and poverty. They get beaten by the same storms and hit with the same poison darts that afflict non-believers.

Many Christians teach that if we're faithful to God, we won't experience as much outward suffering as other people. If we'll just trust in God, they assure us, he'll protect us. He'll cover us with his cosmic force-field. He'll arrange the circumstances of our lives so our troubles will be minimized. We may have to suffer a while, but things will eventually come out right for us.

Paul emphatically does *not* support that popular view. His declaration that "in all things God works together for good" is not a promise that God is going to shield us from trouble. To the contrary, it's a reminder that, as Christians, we're just as vulnerable to life's slings and arrows as anyone else.

Partly to make sure we understand the point, Paul goes on in verse thirty-five to spell out some of the horrible things that can and do happen to Christians. He asks, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword?" (Romans 8:35).

Again, Paul's point isn't that Christ loves us so much that he'll protect us from trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger or sword. Rather, it's that Christ loves so much – and the power of Christ's love is so great – that not even *those* horrible things can cause us to be separated from him.

Our suffering is always magnified if we're surprised by it. We make things so much worse for ourselves when we say, "Hey, this isn't how it's supposed to be! This isn't what I signed up for! Decent people like me who pay their taxes and love Jesus aren't supposed to suffer like this!"

If we want our joy to endure, it has to be suited to the real world where bad things happen to us. It has to be rooted in the sobering truth God doesn't shelter us from suffering and evil.

The second point that Paul makes is sort of a corollary to the first: When things work for good in our lives, it's all because of God.

This, too, is a sobering sort of revelation. What Paul is saying is that we're entirely dependent on God for the good things we enjoy. All our blessings, large and small, flow from him. If God decided, at any moment, to stop guiding and sustaining the created order, we would see the effects in every area of our life.

- Our health would deteriorate.
- Our friendships would sour.
- Our society would crumble.
- Our nation would be at war.

In short, all our worldly dreams would be shattered, and our virtue would be tested to the breaking point.

Paul identifies the problem in verse twenty-one of Romans 8. He says that the whole created order is “subjected to frustration.”

- Everything in our fallen world is unwinding, or decaying, or falling apart.
- All of us live in bodies that, sooner or later, are going to fail us.
- Every creature on the planet is living on borrowed time.
- Nations rise and fall.
- Empires come and go.

Something similar is true of inanimate objects.

- The second you drive off the lot in your spectacular new Lexus or Mercedes, it begins to depreciate in value – so much so that just six or eight years down the road it’s worth less than half of the small fortune you paid for it.
- The average life span of a family owned business, studies show, is only about twenty-four years.
- Most Fortune 500 companies don’t even last half a century.
- Every grain of sand in your yard at home used to be part of a mountain.
- Even the sun, our most enduring symbol of permanence, is doomed to burn itself out.

Many religious people cultivate a sort of naïve optimism about the world that they think must be pleasing to God. They tell themselves that, since the God they worship is loving and kind, things *ought* to go well for them. They believe that if they’ll just put on a smile and maintain a positive attitude, things *will* go well for them.

The danger comes when things *do* go well. Health is restored, a friendship is renewed, or maybe a new job materializes, and the person says to herself: “See, that’s just how it goes for me when I work hard and think good thoughts.” It never occurs to her that the blessing is a direct gift of God. She doesn’t understand that, had God not intervened, her problems would have grown worse. And in the end, the blessing she receives has the effect of strengthening her faith in the world and diminishing her faith in God.

Paul’s second word to us, again, is that when things work for good in our lives, it’s all because of God. I love the way the pastor and theologian Tim Keller makes the point. Keller says:

Christians have to recognize that if our health remains intact, it is simply because God is holding it up. If people love us, if someone is there to hug us... if someone loves us in spite of all our flaws – if someone loves us at all – it’s because God is bringing all things together. God is holding it up. Everything that goes well is a miracle of grace.

- “The Christian’s Happiness,” by Tim Keller

Point number three: God is working through bad things to bring about good.

A spiritually mature person will recognize that a lot of what we think of as bad is actually good. So much of the suffering we endure is like that. For example God uses inconveniences to teach us patience. He uses financial trouble to make us more dependent on him. He uses seemingly impossible challenges to toughen us up and expand our capacities.

In those kinds of instances, the unpleasant things that God uses to bring about good aren’t really bad. They’re like medicine that tastes nasty, but brings a good result.

But Paul isn't just talking in Romans eight, verse twenty-eight about nasty-tasting medicine we sometimes have to drink. He's talking about things that really *are* bad – so bad that no one in their right mind would try to call them good. He's acknowledging that our world is in a state of decay, and is filled with evil things that threaten to destroy us. And he's insisting that God uses those very things to bring about good for us.

Sometimes when awful things happen people make declarations that only make things worse. “Don't be upset,” they say. “This is all part of God's good plan. Someday you'll see that what appears to be a bad thing was actually a good thing.” But the person who is hurting knows that isn't true. Maybe her spouse just left her for another woman. Maybe he's just been diagnosed with cancer. Or maybe she's trying to make sense of her friend's suicide. The person knows in her gut that what is happening is horribly wrong. And what she really needs her Christian friends to do is to acknowledge the evil that's crushing her spirit.

How does God manage to use evil to bring about good for those who love him? How can he redeem the millions of children who die of starvation every year? How can he save the drug addict who wants to be a Jesus follower, but doesn't seem willing or able to leave his habit? How can he use the terrible things that I've experienced, or the despicable things I've done, to bring about good for me?

We rarely see God's hand working through time and circumstance. The great tapestry he is weaving through his church is mostly invisible to us from our vantage point in history.

But one of the crucial revelations of the New Testament is how God used evil to bring about good for every one of us. Jesus was surrounded by evil his entire earthly life. His crucifixion was the most dreadful event in history. Yet God used every enemy and every challenge that Jesus faced to save us. Christ bowed in obedience to his Father and fulfilled every demand made by the Law. As a result, he set us free from our bondage to death and decay. And he offers eternal life to every one of us.

God is in the redemption business. When we find ourselves doubting him, we should remember what he has already accomplished for us in Christ. We may not see his loving hand at work now, next month, next year, or even a decade from now. But, as we place our trust in him, he promises to work through all the nasty junk in our lives to bring about good.

Paul's fourth point is that the good that God brings about can never be lost.

So far we've focused on Romans 8, verse twenty-eight:

We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

Now listen to the promise that follows in verse twenty-nine:

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

Paul isn't laying down an elaborate doctrine of predestination. He's reminding us why we're here. He's clarifying in the simplest possible language the long-term purpose and plan for our life. God is making those of us who love him into people who resemble Jesus, and who will live eternally with Jesus.

A moment ago I talked about the naïve optimism that some people have about the world. Many Christians also are naively optimistic about God and his promise to use the bad to bring about good. When rotten things happen to them, they tell themselves that God must have a better plan, and that circumstances will

surely change for the better. When they don't get the job they thought was perfect for them, they say, "Well God obviously has a better one waiting for me." Or when their girlfriend dumps them, they say, "There's a better person out there – I just need to wait for God to show her to me."

But God doesn't always work that way. He doesn't promise to transform the circumstances of our life so that things turn out the way we *want* then to turn out, or the way we think they *ought* to turn out. What he promises, instead, as we trust him, is to transform our character. He promises to change us so that we will resemble his Son.

Our problem is that we want Christ's joy, but we want it on our terms. We want the temporary sort of joy that comes when the details of our life are falling into place. God wants us to experience the permanent sort of joy that comes from knowing him as a Father, and from serving him as a true daughter or son.

"Those he predestined," Paul declares in verse thirty, "[God] also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."

Is Paul talking about what has already happened in our lives, or is he talking about what will happen in the life to come? The answer is: he's doing both things at once.

He's affirming that, here and now, in the hard, tangled-up, confusing journey we find ourselves on, we can rest in the assurance that we're God's adopted children. We can sit lightly in the saddle and face the day's troubles with peace in our hearts. Because what God has done for us, in Christ, can never be undone. What God has given us can never be taken away.

But Paul is also speaking of our future. He's pointing beyond this world, where we're subject to trials and temptations, to that kingdom where we won't be burdened by our sinful flesh. He's alluding to that day when we'll be so close to Jesus, and we'll be so much like him, that we'll be filled with his joy.

The final point is that God is saving the best things for last.

In the world, we're constantly subject to frustration. Things tend to wind down and fall apart. We hang our hope on the next great thing – the next job, the next relationship, the next business cycle, the next president. But in the long run, the world always disappoints us.

But that's not how God operates. In his kingdom, and for his children, things tend to go from bad to good. Frustration gives way to success. Disappointment is replaced with a growing sense of confidence and excitement about the future. Because what God promises us is not a better set of circumstances, but a joy-filled life with him.

Samuel Johnson suffered greatly throughout his extraordinary life. The great English poet and man of letters was convinced that happiness was within reach for anyone who truly loved God. Standing on the promise of future glory, Johnson wrote of "our prospect for life, a prospect which, as it is beheld with more attention, seems to open more extensive happiness, and spreads by degrees into the boundless regions of eternity."

Don't lose sight of that vision. Keep your eye on the horizon, and don't let the junk you're currently facing drag you down. God is working for your good. What he does for you isn't going to be undone. And he's saving the best things for last. He's preparing you to receive the abundance of joy that's found only in Christ.

Lord Jesus, some of us have been on a long search for joy and we've come up empty. Would you fill us with your joy, the joy that isn't dependent on circumstances, and that endures even when we're hurting?

Thank you, Lord, for standing with us in all our frustrations and disappointments. Thank you for using even the terrible things in our lives to bring about good. Thank you for adopting us as your very own children.

We long to be like you. We praise you for working inside our hearts to change us, and shape us into your image. Help us, Lord, to stop resisting you. Teach us to welcome our trials, knowing that you're using them to change us and give us a better life.

We love you, Father. We open our hearts to you, Holy Spirit. We seek to be your disciples, Lord Jesus. So renew us this day in our walk with you. Amen.