
How many of you remember the wonder of when you first got saved and the joy that filled your heart? Do you ever think about it? Do you ever wish that you could feel like that again? Maybe some of you were raised in a Christian home and accepted Christ when you were just a child and you cannot even remember that time much less know this joy that I am talking about.

I remember when I first got saved it was amazing. His joy was flowing through me in such a powerful way and I always knew He was with me because of how powerful His joy was in my heart. Just the presence of His joy made it so easy for me to turn away from all the things in my life that did not honor God and run to Him for everything. But then something happened. Over the years that joy seemed to waver and to come and go. I did not understand what was going on and I missed that sense of God always being right here. However, as I looked at other Christians and their lives I figured that this must be natural and just what happens to everyone. Maybe it was part and parcel with “spiritual maturity.”

Well, it is pretty much what happens to everyone, at least it seems that way, but I don't believe it is natural and believe me it is not a part of “spiritual maturity”—as if God hooks you with a good feeling then requires you to become boring, stodgy, and lifeless. No, that is not our God!

I have heard many people out of total frustration and longing pray that prayer of David in *Psalms 51:12*: “restore to me the joy of my salvation.” And I guess that is an ok prayer, but the problem is that what most people are seeking is a feeling; they are seeking an experience like they once had. But what they do not understand is that the joy of our salvation comes only with a person and cannot be extricated from that person. Joy is not something that we can go get from the spiritual

shopping center. It is not sitting on a shelf for us to purchase and it's not at the local heavenly charity for us to just go and take. No, it comes with a person!

John 15:11

"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

Tonight we are going to step back a bit and review what "things" Jesus spoke to us and let's see if we can make a connection with what He said and our experiencing His joy. But before we do that I think it is important to understand what joy really is because we don't want to confuse it with what is not joy. For instance, joy is not happiness. Happiness is a temporary emotion that is entirely dependent upon circumstances; thus, it comes and goes with the ups and downs of life. We are happy when we believe that things are going our way and we are not happy when things totally blow. As you know, that experience of happiness can change a gazillion times a day.

Joy, on the other hand, is actually a permanent emotion that is effused through our bodies in what we call rejoicing as we abide in Christ. It is an emotion that derives from Jesus Himself and is therefore not dependent upon our circumstances. It is an emotion that is released as we grow in our knowledge of Jesus and trust Him with our lives. It is a fruit of abiding.

Notice the specificity as Jesus says: "my joy." It is His joy as joy is a part of His nature. Thus, joy is not something which God gives as a gift; it comes with Him. Therefore, praying for the joy of your salvation is not really going to be very effective unless what you mean when you are praying is for the Lord to strip away

everything that is not of Him and help you abide only in Him. If you desire the vinedresser to trim, cut, whack, and chop whatever He deems necessary in order that your connection to the vine grows thick and secure, then you will learn to experience His joy as a permanent part of your life.

You see, since joy is a part of Jesus' nature, the only way for you to experience His joy is through trusting yourself to Him and clinging to Him for everything—letting Him be your way, your truth, and your life. For as you abide in Him He will abide in you and His joy will fill you to abundance.

Psalm 16:11 says: “in your presence is fullness of joy.” When you understand this then you can make sense as to why so many Christians seem to lose this joy not too long after they have been saved. I know for me when I first trusted myself to Jesus I was full on and I threw myself at Him just loving being loved by Him. However, because I was never taught how to live by faith and walk in the Spirit of God through the *New Creation*, soon religion started dictating what my walk with God was to look like and it had very little to do with actively believing the truth and everything to do with trying to adhere to Christian behaviors and disciplines. The more I focused on trying to do it right the more the joy just drained from my body. This got so bad that God decided to do some major reconstruction on my branch to restore to me the freshness of loving being loved by Him and with that has come the permanent presence of His joy.

I was thinking about this the other day in terms of my practical experience with joy. I find that no matter what is happening in my life and how bummed out I am, as soon as I start talking to someone about Jesus and His love for them, I instantly smile. I can't help it but I do. I find that His joy is in me because He is the one who is talking through me. I could be filled with stress and tension and even be all depressed, but get me talking about my God and you will see an immediate and

sudden shift. All of a sudden this life and intensity starts to come from me and I get all excited.

Honestly, I really love talking about my God and helping others know about His outrageous love. It gets my eyes of myself and off the little pity parties that I tend to throw for myself and fixates me on all that is wonderful about Him. It's as if *Psalm 30:11-12* instantly becomes a reality in my life and He turns my mourning into dancing and girds me with gladness. It is so beautiful to me to see Him in action and I am so blessed that God has chosen to use me in this way. What a privilege to be there as God starts to minister His love to you; it cause me to rejoice.

The joy of the Lord has also provided a powerful way for me to overcome the terrors of my life and to endure the chopping, cutting, whacking, and trimming process.

Nehemiah 8:10

Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength."

God wants you to know that when the vinedresser gets busy on your life it is necessary and it is for the purpose of bringing more of Him into your life. That is why you don't have to grieve but you can actually look forward to what He is going to accomplish. And as you yield to Him just know that you will be filled with His joy and the strength that allows you to deal with anything and everything.

The joy of the Lord is your strength. Isn't it so cool that God does not just show up in our lives with a harsh authoritative hand or in some sterile disassociated way,

but He shows up with a ton of emotion. In fact, He wants His emotions to become our emotions and His joy to give us the strength to endure and the ability to overcome. I cannot even understand those that think God is boring. Religion is boring! But my God is no where even close to boring. God is freaking amazing.

The joy of the Lord is my strength. I love to be in the presence of God and just experience Him—it always strengthens me. I have found that as I worship Him, He fills me. As I let Him work through me, He fills me. As I love Him and love everything about Him, He fills me. This is why I love coming to church. I can't tell you how much I look forward to our gatherings on Sunday and Thursday nights. I also love to meet with you guys one-on-one and just have Jesus be there with us. And what is so cool is that it does not always have to be an intense hard-core experience; I find it totally enjoyable just to meet with you and Him together. Sometimes I get the feeling that you think that if we are not dealing with some gut wrenching thing that our time is not really productive, but that is so wrong. There is so many times when God just wants us to enjoy each other and find strength in being connected with Him.

The joy of the Lord is my strength. God has really wanted this truth to be a reality in my life. And I am thankful. I know that on my own I would have never been able to endure the kind of trouble that I have experienced over the past 8 years. In fact, I probably should be addicted to something or drooling on myself while locked away in some white room (I am serious); but His joy has literally been my strength.

Before God took me through what have been 8-years of horrifically intense terror, which was the capstone on a total of 25 years of serious suffering, He made a lot of pretty awesome promises to me—amazing promises that are going to be so cool when He fulfills them. He was very purposeful about the timing of when He

gave me those promises and why He gave them to me. You see, those promises always gave me HOPE to make it through another day, another hour, and at times another moment.

When everything was dark and so indescribably painful, I would go to those passages and read about what God is going to do and I would think about how amazing that is going to be. Sometimes I would think I was stupid for believing that God was going to do any of it (and believe me there were many people in my life who were telling me I was stupid for believing the promises that God had made), but at the same time I knew He would do everything just as He said. For me, this HOPE was not just a wish, it was a confidence; it was something of which I was fully convinced. It has truly been a *Hebrews 11:1* experience for me.

This marvelous thing about this HOPE is that it always kept me looking to Jesus. That was a clever move by the Father. You see, the more I looked to Jesus to make good on those promises, the more I found that I was able to endure what He allowed in my life. And not just endure; He gave me His strength to live through the darkness and even experience His pleasure in the midst of horrific circumstances. It really makes no sense. In fact, when I think back on some of the darkest times, it was then that He was talking to me the most and teaching me His Word. He was showing me what it means to live according to who I am in the *New Creation* and to live by faith consumed by the reality of His outrageous love.

But what was really trippy is that during this time, He was also using me to give strength and stability to those first few people that He had me disciple in this truth—those who literally had to be ripped away from religion (roots and all). It was a very violent ripping that caused much chaos and damage in their lives; and, to my surprise, He had me there all broken and shattered to be their encouragement, their strength, and to point them to Jesus so they would also be

able to endure. Honestly, I have no idea how that happened; it was entirely supernatural.

It was interesting but the HOPE that He had given me had in many ways also become their HOPE. I talked to them about these promises over and over not just because it was so cool and sounded so fantastic, but because I believe they are going to be direct beneficiaries of what God is still going to do. He attached them to me for the entire journey through the storm (they were my shipmates) and I believe they will get to participate in the life that will come from this time of trouble. After all, according to *Psalm 30:5* His anger is but for a moment, His favor is for a lifetime; weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning. And we are so looking forward to the dawn and we will shout for joy.

Anyway, as God was ripping them away from all that they thought was God but wasn't, I had to keep reminding them that the promises of God are always only fulfilled by faith; thus, like me they also had to keep their eyes on Jesus. I knew that because God had placed them on this journey with me, we were—by faith—going to have to complete this journey together. This meant that if any one of us were not believing and not looking to Jesus that the entire journey was going to take longer than any of us could ever imagine. To God a thousand years is like a day, so what is a long time to us is nothing to God. He is more interested in our completing this journey together so He can fulfill every promise that He has made.

Thus, we have to believe in the HOPE that He gave us; we have to believe that He always does exactly as He says; we have to know that if we hold to His promises they will comfort us, protect us and be a shield about us. We have to hold on to HOPE.

Psalm 91:4

He will shield you with His wings. He will shelter you with His feathers. His faithful promises are your armor and protection.

For example, in Habakkuk 2, He gave a promise to one of those who has been on the journey with me:

Habakkuk 2:2-4

Then the Lord said to me, “Write my answer in a large, clear letters on a tablet, so that a runner can read it and tell everyone else. But these things I plan won’t happen right away. Slowly, steadily, surely, the time approaches when the vision will be fulfilled. If it seems slow, wait patiently, for it will surely take place, it will not be delayed. Look at the proud! They trust in themselves, and their lives are crooked, but the righteous will live by their faith.

He spoke this Word so that my friend would also have HOPE; a HOPE that was independent from what He had told me. A HOPE that would not just be a wish or a fanciful idea, but a conviction that no matter how long it took, he was going to do what He said; it will surely take place. This passage was given so that we could all keep our eyes fixed on Jesus no matter what was happening around us and to us. He knew that if we chose to live by faith—believing in what He has promised—then we will, by definition, have to trust ourselves to Him and cling to Him for our very lives. And if we did trust ourselves to Him, then He will abide in us and as a

result we will have the joy that has become our strength—the strength to endure the time of waiting for God to act upon His promises.

When I stop to think about the past 8-years, the whole time has been amazing in so many ways. There were many times when I was so messed up that I was just laid out flat on the floor unable to function, but when He needed me to do something He would get me focused once again on my HOPE and the whole process would start to unfold. I would look to Jesus and gain His strength and once again experience His joy—a joy that allowed me to be on top of the waves instead of underneath them. From this place I was able to give His love to those whom He had appointed for me and be patient with those who were coming against me. Truly, His joy is our strength!

Now, don't get me wrong, I did not always do this right. There were so many times that I did not hold fast to my HOPE and began to drown beneath the waves. Too many times I looked at my HOPE and got resentful and even bitter at it because it all seemed like such a fairy tale compared to where God had me and how it looked like my suffering would go on and on and on, forever. And believe me, those times only pulled me down deeper and deeper into despair and darkness; there was no joy in that place. The only joy I have ever experienced has been when I have kept my eyes on Jesus and looked to Him to be my way, my truth, and my life. That is it!

Earlier I said that joy was a permanent emotion and the reason I said that is because Jesus promised that He would never leave us or forsake us; thus, we could always have as much of Him—and as much of His joy—as we want. He is willing to give Himself to us fully if we are willing to abide in Him. His joy will be our joy if we are willing to let Him have His rightful place as Lord in our lives.

John 15:11

"These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.

I think that now is a good time to review what Jesus has told us between ***Chapter 13*** and ***15*** so that we can know why we can trust ourselves to Him, why we must abide in Him, and why we should always experience His joy and never live without it!

Remember that this evening of instruction started when, after His final meal, Jesus got up, took off His robe, and washed the disciples' feet. He told them that they were already clean and they only needed their feet washed. This means that you and I have been washed white in His love. We stand absolutely clean before Him. Our rebellion is forgiven and our sin has been put out of His sight. This is the reason why God no longer deals with us on the basis of sin. This is the reason He is never disappointed, distressed, surprised, saddened, annoyed, or offended by us. Never! He looks at us and sees that we are entirely clean. All He wants is for us to be regularly washed in His Word so that the parts of us that get soiled by walking and living in this world are restored to their natural state of being clean.

He then said that anyone who welcomes His messenger is welcoming Him. This means that He really does live through you and has really taken up domicile in your *New Creation*. He actually lives in your heart and people get to touch Him, see Him, and experience Him through you. The intangible God becomes very tangible as He moves through you, speaks through you, and loves through you.

He promised that one day we will follow Him to heaven and always be with Him. But in the meantime He is preparing a place for us in His Father's home and

when all is ready He will come for us take us to this place where we can go and hide during the time when His great wrath is poured out on this earth. He also promised that from that time forward we will be with Him and will always know where He is at.

He said that He is our way, our truth, and our life. He is it; all else is just a lie and a bunch of empty promises and wishful thinking and will never satisfy; in fact, all else will leave us wanting and yearning with an insatiable hunger that can only be filled by Jesus.

He says that because we have known Him we know the Father for the Father is in Jesus. All we have to do is look to what Jesus said, what He did, and the way He handled Himself and we will be seeing what the Father said, what the Father did, and the way the Father handled Himself.

He says that anyone who believes in Him will do the same works as He has done, and even greater works. We know this because He will be living in us doing His works through us. And because it all brings glory to His Father, He actually wants to do many, many works that go beyond anything we could think or imagine. Thus, He says that if we ask anything in His name and He will do it. In His name means that when we are praying in the Spirit according to His will God will not only hear us but act on our prayers. It's an amazing privilege as He lets us have a part in the unfolding of His great and marvelous plan as His will in heaven is done here on earth.

Then He says that if we love Him, if we Agape Him, we will be obedient to His commands. This is important in 2 regards and speaks of the fact that Jesus is our way, our truth, and our life. First, we have absolutely no ability on our own to operate out of Agape love. It is a love that originates from the divine (although

amazing enough it miraculously can be expressed through us). But since Agape only comes from God it takes God in us to love God; He is therefore our obedience. Secondly, if we love God, then He will be living in and through us and fulfilling all the commandments of the Father in our lives. We will merely be a vessel that pours forth with His mercy and grace into the lives of others as He does those great works that the Father has appointed for Him to accomplish through us. Again, He is both our love and He is our obedience. That is why He says that apart from Him we can do nothing!

He has also given us another counselor, the Holy Spirit, who will live in us and never leave us. This counselor will guide us into all truth. In other word, the Holy Spirit will lead us deeper and deeper into Jesus who is the truth.

He promised that He will not abandon us as orphans but He will come to us. We call this event the rapture of the church. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the *trumpet* of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. It is a promise, a HOPE, in which we can depend.

He also promised that we will see Him because the Holy Spirit will reveal all the intimate details of His nature and character to us. Others do not get to see Him, but we do. And because we can discern His presence, we never have to fear thinking that we are alone. In addition, since the Father is in Jesus we can know that the Father is also in us. Can you imagine? The entirety of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—have taken up their residence in our hearts because we are loved by the Father.

The Holy Spirit will not only reveal Jesus to us by leading us into the truth, but He will teach us all things and remind us of what Jesus has said. When we are in a place of need, the Spirit is always there to remind us that we do not have to fear, we do not have to worry, we do not have to live in dread, that we are loved by the Father and if we look to Jesus to be our way, our truth, and our life, He will be our provision right at that moment.

This truth leaves us with an incredible peace of mind and heart. This is His gift to us. This is not a peace that the world can give or that those in the world can even experience. Only we have the privilege of experiencing His peace; in fact, we can even learn to navigate our lives through His peace. When we experience His peace of heart and mind then we can know that we are walking in the Spirit of God down the path that He has established for us. But if we do not have that peace of heart and mind, then we know we have stepped out of alignment with Jesus and that there must be some wrong belief or unbelief that has lead us down the wrong path.

And since we can navigate our lives with the guidance of this gift of peace, we don't have to fear or be troubled about what is happening in our lives or what direction we need to take; we can always know the way. We can always know the best path that He has chosen for us to walk.

He then tells us that the Father who is in Him is even greater than He is; so ultimate power and authority all lies with Jesus. That is why He says that the devil has no power over Him and even though the Father will use the devil as a tool to accomplish His purposes, Jesus is supreme. He told us this before it happened so we would know that even though horrible things would happen to Jesus He was only doing what the Father required of Him; He was merely living in obedience to His Dad so that all the world would know that He loves His Dad.

The implication of this to our lives is nothing short of phenomenal. Because the entirety of the Godhead has taken up residence in our *New Creation*, when we live by faith the enemy is absolutely powerless over our lives. In fact, the enemy's flaming arrows of lies and deceit fall powerless to the ground as we stand completely protected by our shield of faith. Further, if God does allow the enemy to have access to our lives, it is only because the devil is a tool that God will use to accomplish His purposes. We therefore do not need to fear the devil in any way shape or form. Our Father is bigger, greater, and more powerful. We just need to live as if our real life is hidden with Christ in God.

He then describes everything He just said in a very colorful metaphor using the image of a vine, a branch, a gardener, and fruit. What we have described to us is that as a branch there is nothing we can do unless we are attached to the vine receiving His sap. If we at anytime become disconnected to the vine, in terms of our fellowship with Him, then all that comes from our life will be worthless and will not follow us into eternity. It will be like dried broken branches that are only good for the fire. For it is only when we are attached to the vine that His fruit, which will last through eternity, will naturally be produced from our lives.

We are also told that the vinedresser or the gardener is always busy in our lives, pruning us for greater fruitfulness. Remember, He wants us to produce those great works, but that only comes as a result of being so totally connected to Jesus and depending upon Him for everything. The Father is therefore always busy cutting and trimming off all those places where we tend to latch on to some person, thing, dream, idea, fantasy, hurt, damage, or whatever that is not the vine. He wants us to be secure and feed only on His sap; therefore He cuts. He also closely watches to see if some of our branches are too thin because we have grown too fast and spread

out too far from the vine. If so, He trims us back so that our connection to the vine becomes thicker and more secure so the fruit that we produce will be the best.

Then He tells us that we are loved in the same measure, depth, height, length, and capacity as the Father loves Jesus. We really cannot conceive the reality of this; it is too big for our heads to fathom. But His love is outrageous, unbelievable, never ending, and limitless; thus, it just makes perfect sense for us to remain in His love. Our entire identity is to be found in the fact that we are beloved of God. We are to understand how immense His love for us really is so that we will learn to not just be called children of God, *but actually live as children of God*.

And when we obey Jesus and remain in His love then we will be filled with His joy and this joy will overflow as He has come to give us life and give it abundantly. Remember, in His presence is *fullness* of joy not sparseness. Do you understand that Jesus is never selfish with us? He gave His life for us just so we can experience more and more of Him and thereby continually live in His joy. He wants us to be filled to the brim, crammed full with His joy so that it ultimately just overflows from our life and is a blessing to others.

Think of all the amazing things Jesus has said to us—all the reasons why we must abide in the vine. When I think of what we have studied in the past number of weeks I am taken back. Sometimes I think that Jesus is crazy and must be out of His mind to love us this way. I mean we are so ridiculous yet He is always so consistent in His love and His intentions toward us. We truly have had the good news preached to our hearts. He has given us every reason to remain in His love and not to go wondering off trying to find some level of fulfillment in things that we know will never satisfy.

How many of you are still seeking to be filled by being attached to a boy or a girl? Is that where you are trying to find your validation through the attention you can get? How many of you strive to find approval from your parents or other loved ones so that you can feel as if you matter to someone. How many of you are hoping to find the right job and the right career that will bring you some level of happiness? How many of you think that if you can get enough money you will be safe and be able to live a decent life? How many of you think that if you will be able to find a way to achieve peace within yourself if you can just do this or do that? How many of you forget to live as someone who's Dad is the ruler of this universe? How many of you settle with looking to yourself and your wisdom to figure out your life instead of relying on His peace of mind and heart? How many of you look to substances or deviant behaviors to deal with the lack of His peace of mind and heart? How many of you still settle with fear, insecurity, anxiety, worry, and so many other things that just do not come with the presence of Jesus?

We are the ones who are crazy. All of us know that no one and nothing other than Jesus has ever satisfied us; rather, it has always left us in serious wanting. We need His presence to overwhelm us; we need His presence in abundance so that our joy (which is His joy) may be made full in us.

In closing, I want to read from some Psalms that really blessed me this week. They speak of God's joy and how the presence of His joy in our lives is based on our willingness to trust Him. While I read them, ask the Lord to begin to convince you so of His love and of all the reasons (which He has clearly articulated) why no other decision makes sense except to abide in Him, to remain in Him, and to trust yourself to His outrageous love.

Psalm 32:1-2

Oh, what joy for those whose rebellion is forgiven, whose sin is put out of sight!
Yes, what joy for those whose record the Lord has cleared of sin, whose lives are lived in complete honesty!

Psalm 32:8-11

The Lord says, “I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you. Do not be like a senseless horse or mule that need a bit and bridle to keep it under control.” Many sorrows come to the wicked, but unfailing love surrounds those who trust the Lord. So rejoice in the Lord and be glad, all you who obey Him! Shout for joy, all you whose hearts are pure!

Psalm 33:1, 4, 12, 18

Let the godly sing with joy to the Lord, for it is fitting to praise Him...for the word of the Lord holds true, and everything He does is worthy of our trust...What joy for the nation whose God is the Lord, whose people he has chosen for His own...But the Lord watches over those who fear Him, those who rely on His unfailing love.

Psalm 34:5, 8

Those who look to Him for help will be radiant with joy; no shadow of shame will darken their faces...Taste and see that the Lord is good. Oh, the joys of those who trust in Him!

Psalm 28:7-8

The Lord is my strength and shield. I trust him with all my heart. He helps me, and my heart is filled with joy. I burst out in songs of thanksgiving. The Lord gives his people strength.

And finally a promise of David that I am also holding on to as my HOPE!

Psalm 126:5-6

Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy. They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest.

Let's Pray