

BEING NOURISHED IN JOY

By Gordon Bals

HOW BUOYANT DO YOU FEEL from day to day? Are there times when the beauty of life catches you off guard and you smile? The answers to these questions are found in part by examining the way we integrate joy into our life. The naming, accepting and celebrating of joy in the Christian life is a process every believer needs to grow in to remain "alive" over the long haul. If we are not receptive to joy or we try to manufacture it we will make endurance as a believer much harder. The prophet Nehemiah encouraged his people in their process of restoration with these words, "Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the LORD is your strength," (Nehemiah 8:10). Our day to day buoyancy is related to how well we are regularly nourished by the "joy of the Lord." In the absence of being nourished this way our culture is saturated with opportunities to participate in counterfeit joy. Eugene Peterson says, "The enormous entertainment industry in America is a sign of the depletion of joy in our culture. Society is a bored, gluttonous king employing a court jester to divert it after an overindulgent meal. But that kind of joy never penetrates our lives, never changes our basic constitution." Genuine joy is central to the Christian life. For joy to become a regular participant on our Christian journey we must allow our memories to be redeemed, we must learn to name joy and we must learn to celebrate the joy-filled moments we experience.

Remembering and holding onto joy is not as easy as we often imagine. The evil one certainly offers us forged instances of joy and tries to get us to over indulge joyful pleasures as a way to mask the true power of joy. However, one of the most subtle ways he obscures our joy is by covering the daily graces in our lives or minimizing their impact. At the same time he will highlight painful episodes or events that bring despair. Take for instance, a moment years ago when I was wrestling on the floor with my three girls. They were cackling and smiling with great delight. As I took in the expressions on their faces I heard the Holy Spirit say, "How come you never remember these times. Why are the events you recall from day to day ones

that depict an area of weakness or sin as a father?" At that moment I realized that even my memory was fleshly. I actually experienced far more life-giving moments with my girls from day-to-day then I held onto in my mind and those joy-filled memories were obscured by painful incidents that made me despondent.

Our memories tell a story. They serve a purpose. In our flesh, our memories will tell stories that detach us from God and mock his caring involvement in our life. There are two commands we find repeated throughout the scriptures: remember and rejoice. Our fleshly tendency can be to forget and despair. The fathering memories I was holding on to told the story of an absent God and a mean father. I talked and obsessed more about my parenting mistakes and had a harder time celebrating the recollections that would bring

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me hope. When we are genuinely remembering our experiences in truth (the good and bad mixed together but orchestrated towards hope) they tell the story of God's kindness and redemption. We must pray that our memory is redeemed.

Consider how Moses spoke with the Israelites after they were released from bondage. He said to them, "Always remember this day. This is the day when you came out of Egypt from a house of slavery. God brought you out of here with a powerful hand," (Exodus 13:3). At that moment he was confronting their human tendency to forget the good things that God does in such a way that unbelief and despair rule the day. We must long for redemption in our memory the same way we long for redemption everywhere else. Practicing at what God has asked us to remember facilitates redemption. As our

memory is redeemed it tells more of God's story and contributes to our day to day strength.

The next thing we need to do is to learn how to name joy. Joy is grounded in God and his victory over this world and it comes to us as a gift. At times joy is laughter and moments of pleasure that lifts our countenance towards God and at times it is a deeper respite that connects us with redemption and the unfolding of God's coming kingdom. There are at least two types of joy: forgetful joy and connected joy. Forgetful joy is an experience of delight that comes from partaking in reminders of home (heaven). This helps us to disregard our present reality as aliens and foreigners living in a strange land ruled by the accuser. Forgetful joy evolves from the simple pleasures God provides to

help push away the weight of this fallen world. The Psalmist says, "You cause grass to grow for the cattle. You cause plants to grow for the people to use. You allow them to produce food from the earth-wine to make them glad, olive oil as lotion for their skin, and bread to give them strength," (Psalm 104:14-15). In regards to this verse Allender and Longman say, "To make them glad implies a degree of joy brought through the chemical effects of the wine. There are a number of degrees of intoxication, and the word in this passage implies a slight buzz, a small but pleasant change of mood due to the wine. The idea that God recognizes the sorrow and desperation of living in a fallen world and provides for an occasional oasis break in our desert journey in not a commonly held Christian perspective," (**Bold Purpose**, p.139). If we are unable to welcome the pleasure God wants to give us, the joy of the Lord will not be our strength.

Forgetful joy can happen to us each day. It can be a good night's sleep, a cup of coffee in the morning, a relaxing lunch, a good book or a humorous exchange with a friend. Forgetful joy is attached to the sensual pleasures God gives

us each day. The prophet Nehemiah said to his people, "Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!" (Nehemiah 8:10). The simple gifts of this life connect us with the Lord's kindness and help us to forget the weight of this world. "Naming" this type of joy means we accept that it comes from the Lord's hand and we turn away from our tendency to make it an idol. Every good thing comes to us as a gift from God (James 1:17) and the more we grow in 'God-consciousness' the more we name every gift as a kindness from God that leads us into joy.

In addition to forgetful joy, we can experience connected joy. This type of joy comes to us in more meaningful relational encounters with the Lord and others. It is a fuller taste of joy because it goes beyond the sensuality of physical pleasure and touches us in the depths of soul. Connected joy is deep contentment from experiencing an intimate touch from the Lord that reminds us He has not forgotten us and that we will one day see him face to face. "You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever," (Psalm 16:11). In connected joy we experience a fresh or new taste of God personally and it penetrates deeper than bodily gratification. For instance, a kind call from a friend will touch us differently than a warm bath. They both bring us pleasure and can help us be thankful for God but the phone call, because of its relational dynamic, can go deeper. In fact, as the person making the call knows us more intimately and incarnates the Gospel more freely, the joy will infiltrate deeper and bring us closer to the Lord.

Frequently, we only believe connected joy is experienced in prayer, meditating on Scripture, or gathering for corporate worship. These are undoubtedly primary conduits that invite intimacy with the Lord but over time practicing at them can soften us to the point where we are regularly touched by God in a variety of ways. Whenever God uniquely uses one of the many avenues (friends, a sunset, music, movies, food, good writing, etc.) at his authority to personally care for us in a profound way we experience connected joy.

There is a day when we will see God face to face and on that day joy will penetrate us fully and we will rest completely in the unfettered beauty of his presence. Between now and then God is reconciling us to Him and will orchestrate events or moments to care for us personally. As we receive Him in those moments we experience connected joy.

The most overwhelming moment of connected joy I have ever experienced came about 3 years ago the day after my wife and I arrived home from our sixteenth anniversary weekend. After dinner our three young girls asked us to remain seated because they had a present for us. Several minutes later they brought out a large wrapped package. My wife opened up the package to find "An Anniversary Book" our girls had put together all by themselves. Now my girls were only 11, 9 and 7 at the

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time. They said, "We have been working on it for three months. Even though we kept fighting we stayed at it." During our weekend away my wife and I had even commented how our girls seemed so much more together lately. Well the book was over thirty pages long. They had a page of definitions for words like anniversary, marriage, kids, fun, parents, and patience. The definition for patience was "putting up with your kids and loving your wife/husband at the same time!" There was a page called, "Happy times," that our youngest Elise put together. On that page she had arranged several pictures, all of which she was in, into a collage. We laughed about that. I was struck by the fact that Elise had really contributed to several different parts in the book. We had continually tried to teach the older two that when 'the weakest among you' is protected and nurtured then true character is being displayed. Now we saw the fruit of those words.

There was a page of memories, a page of what they loved about mom and dad. There was a page called, "Sisterhood,"

that among other comments noted that, "sister means diva, drama queen, laugh, cry, good times, and hard times." On the page of 'illustrations' our oldest daughter drew a picture of her and her sisters at a carnival. The three of them were all standing on a "nurture scale." The recorded measurement on the nurture scale was shooting out the top. In the crowd around the nurture scale one person was saying "boy their parents must be great". At the end of the book there was a page entitled, "Come and enjoy. Two free tickets to see Sisters in Motion (S.I.M.) performing to 'Because You Live'." We asked who the "sisters in motion" were and the girls told us we would have to go downstairs to see. We walked downstairs into our finished basement. Each daughter got into one of the three closets in the room and asked us to start the music. All at once they stepped out of the closets and they proceeded to perform a choreographed dance to the song

"Because You Live," which is teeny-bopper song of gratefulness. I said to myself, "What adult taught them these moves and made them practice." The moves were creative and they were in sync. I couldn't believe that they had put everything together by themselves. When they were done we were sitting on the couch reminiscing. My Aimee said, "Dad I have seen you cry before but I have never seen you cry like that." And she was right. After our reminiscing was over my wife declared it was time for bed. I said, "No, I have never felt this close to heaven. This celebration can't end. We are going out for ice cream" and we did.

In some ways the unfolding of that evening connected me to every sacrifice I had ever made and to some degree redeemed them. In the work my daughters put into the book and dance, and in their desire to demonstrate their gratefulness, I heard the Lord saying, "I have not forgotten you." My heart has never felt so at rest. Every tear I shed that night joyfully declared God's faithfulness and awesomeness. On that one night my whole life felt connected to God's goodness and redemptive power. It was deep joy.

Each of us, if we were to stop and think, could recall moments of forgetful joy and connected joy. It is actually important to remember those moments. Let's remember and rejoice so we battle our tendency to forget and despair. Consider what Moses said to the Israelites, "Just remember what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all the land of Egypt. Remember the great terrors the Lord your God sent against them. You

saw it all with your own eyes! And remember the miraculous signs and wonders, and the strong hand and powerful arm with which he brought you out of Egypt," (Deuteronomy 7:18-19). We are not to forget the ways God takes care of us. The best way to lean into the joy the Lord brings into our lives is to keep celebrating it. I have told and will continue to tell the story of the "sisters in motion" the rest of my life. I don't ever plan on getting tired of talking about it. That was a large moment.

However, it is important to tell of the small moments as well. The scriptures clearly remind us to "rejoice with those who

rejoice" (Romans 12:15). One of the best ways to honor God's kindness is to share it with friends. If we are to become people of strength and hope one of the avenues there is learning to celebrate well. You might simply tell your friend about the new brand of coffee you are enjoying in the morning or you might sit weeping at their side describing a profound moment of God's kindness. Either way, by sharing together in these moments, we are saying and re-saying the Lord cares about us and has not forgotten us. As we recount these moments we are crystallizing their impact and working God's kindness into deeper recesses in our heart.

The joy of the Lord is our strength. In his song, "You Move Me" Pierce Pettis sings, "You go whistling in the dark making light of it, making light of it and I follow with my heart laughing all the way." I believe he is talking about God's triumphant victory over the evil one and our capacity to follow him along the path of redemption. My hope is that as our memory is redeemed, and we do a better job at naming and celebrating joy, that it will help us to follow the Lord with some good laughter and daily strength.



DAYMARK NEWS



YEAR-END GIVING

We wanted to express our overwhelming gratefulness for the generous year-end financial gifts we received. Over \$23,000 came in during the month of December! Given the present economic culture we were more than overwhelmed and grateful. Amazingly, the regular monthly contributions together with our year end giving means we ended the year on budget. Thank you! The board would love to provide Bill White, our newest counselor, with a car. It is a great way to supplement income in a cost effective way. If you, or anyone you know, would be in a position to donate a car to the ministry we would love to hear from you (this would be a tax-deductible gift). As you are able please pray for Bill, Julie and Gordon as they meet each week with the people the Lord sends to Daymark.



NEW COUNSELOR



Bill White is the newest addition to the Daymark staff and has been working part time since November of last year. He will start full-time in April. He holds a Masters of Divinity from Columbia Biblical Seminary and is presently pursuing a Doctorate of Ministry in Pastoral Counseling from Westminster Theological Seminary, where he has studied under the faculty of the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation (CCEF). He also earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Miami University (OH). Bill is licensed in the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA), and has been serving in vocational Christian ministry since 1985, including not only counseling, but also discipleship, teaching, and missions. Bill is an elder in his church, and regularly teaches there on a variety of topics. He has been married since 1988, and has two 2 daughters and one son. Please continue to pray for him and his transition.



SEMINARS

Presently, Gordon and Julie are open to and interested in scheduling seminars for 2009. If you would like them to speak at your event, please contact us at 205-871-3332.



WEB SITE UPDATE

Gordon has begun a blog called "Pipe Down". If you are interested in interacting with others through his blog, you can access it from our website, www.daymarkcounseling.com, and click the "Gordon's Blog" button on the bottom of the home page. We will also be adding an electronic donations option this year through our web site. Check for that update in the next couple of months.

For more information about
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