

An Invitation to Joy

January 8, 2023

1 of 6 in *The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength*

Happy New Year, everyone!

With a New Year comes a new annual Ministry Theme for Cornerstone, and the theme we believe God is calling us to focus on throughout 2023 is:

Making space for JOY and FLOURISHING

- In our lives
- In our church
- In our community
- In the world

Joy and flourishing are closely related themes in scripture. The latter term—flourishing—is connected with the biblical Hebrew word *shalom*, which is usually translated as “peace.”

Later in the year, we’re going to do an entire sermon series on *shalom*, and its profound implications for our lives. But for now, suffice it to say that *shalom* has to do with the kind of flourishing that happens when people and things are in a state of right relationship.

Shalom is about the world as God intends it to be— about life as God intends it to be. And God is indeed at work in Jesus to ultimately make his creation a place where everyone and everything flourishes together in perfect, interrelated harmony.

As followers of Jesus, we can experience this *shalom* even now, albeit in part. Indeed, God calls you and me to be agents of his *shalom* in this world, so that there might be as much flourishing now as possible, even as we await the day of Jesus’ return, when finally and forever (to borrow words from the great Christian mystic Julian of Norwich), “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

But from the Bible’s perspective *shalom* or flourishing cannot be given adequate expression without making reference to joy.¹

New Testament scholar Marianne Meye Thompson explains that:

¹ Justin E. Crisp (ed. Miroslav Volf), *Joy and Human Flourishing: Essays on Theology, Culture, and the Good Life*, p. xv.

Joy is a disposition... a way of living that hopes for God's final *shalom*, but, anticipating that *shalom* already in the present, also lives with confident hope and gratitude in the present time.²

These past few years, the world and to a certain extent this church, not to mention many of you personally — have been living in crisis mode.

In the Old Testament, when God's people were emerging from the crisis of a long and arduous exile in a foreign land, their leaders Ezra and Nehemiah told them:

“Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”³

It's from this verse that we draw the title of the sermon series we're beginning today: *The Joy of the Lord is Our Strength*.

We've spent the last few years continually pivoting in response to the crisis of a global pandemic. It's been hard and at times exhausting. But now, God is inviting us as a community of his people to find new strength by living into, as well as out of, the joy of the Lord.

Doesn't that invitation sound good?

In this sermon series, week by week we're going to unpack various aspects of biblical joy, and what they mean for our lives, for our discipleship as followers of Jesus, and for our mission a church.

Today, I'll be kicking off the series with a message called *An Invitation to Joy* which will basically provide you with an overview of what biblical joy is about.

In the time that remains, I'd like to share with you five characteristics of biblical joy, and then we'll top things off with a joyful celebration of the Lord's Supper—our first communion of 2023.

I'll spend more time on some of these characteristics than others, but the first one we'll be looking at today is that:

1. Biblical joy is profoundly relational.

² Marianne Meye Thompson, *Ibid.* p. 38.

³ Nehemiah 8:10b (NIV)

In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 45 to describe Jesus, the Son of God, saying:

... God has anointed you,
pouring out the oil of joy on you more than on anyone else. ⁴

The people who knew Jesus best testified again and again as how incredibly joyful he was. This is the same Jesus of whom Hebrews says just a few verses earlier:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being... ⁵

If Jesus was anointed with the oil of joy more than anyone else, and is the exact representation of God's being, do you know what that means? It means that contrary to popular opinion, God is actually the most joyful being in the universe!

Why is God so joyful? It's because God is a relational God, in and of himself. The one true God exists as a loving community of three persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And as Pastor Steve Dewitt says:

Before you ever had a happy moment, or your great grandparents had a happy moment, or Adam and Eve had a happy moment, before the universe was even created, God the Father and God the Son, and God the Spirit were enjoying a perfect and robust relational delight in one another. ⁶

Scripture gives us various glimpses into the relational joy shared by the members of the divine Trinity.

In Matthew chapter 3, we read that:

After his baptism, as Jesus came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and settling on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy." ⁷

And in John's gospel, Jesus tells his disciples:

⁴ Hebrews 1:9 (NLT, quoting Psalm 45:6-7)

⁵ Hebrews 1:3a (NIV)

⁶ As quoted by John Mark Comer in his talk [Unhurrying with a Rule of Life: Joy: Part 1](#).

⁷ Matthew 3:16-17 (NLT)

“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you.”⁸

According to Jesus, our joy will overflow when we remain in his love, just as he remains in the Father’s love. And then we are to share that same love with one another.

So biblical joy is profoundly relational. It starts with God, who exists in the joy of the eternal loving relationship of Father, Son and Spirit. The great Swiss theologian Karl Barth has said:

God’s Triune being is radiant, and what it radiates is joy. Its loving interweaving of persons, as in a cosmic dance, radiates beauty.⁹

Through Jesus, God invites you and me into that dance, to share the joy of loving relationship with him, and with each other as well. Because as another theologian, Miroslav Volf, explains:

Joy is best experienced in community. Joy seeks company.¹⁰

The New Testament letter to the Philippians— often called “the epistle of joy”— is an extended celebration of the deep bond of mutual affection shared between the apostle Paul and the Philippian believers. (By the way, we’ll be doing a sermon series on the book of Philippians this spring.)

The New Testament letters of John also speak of the joy that comes from the loving relationship shared between John and his readers. John concludes his second letter by saying:

I have much more to say to you, but I don’t want to do it with paper and ink. For I hope to visit you soon and talk face to face. Then our joy will be complete.¹¹

As much as our relationships with each other are essential to our growth in joy, at the end of the day, it is the joy of the Lord himself that is our strength. God himself is both the

⁸ John 15:9-12 (NLT)

⁹ As quoted by John Mark Comer in his talk [Unhurrying with a Rule of Life: Joy: Part 1](#)

¹⁰ Miroslav Volf, *Joy and Human Flourishing*, p. 132.

¹¹ 2 John 12 (NLT)

source as well as the object of our greatest joy. “In your presence is fullness of joy,” declares the psalmist to God.¹²

Here, and in other passages, the word “presence” is a translation of the Hebrew word for “face.” So joy is found in a face-to-face relationship with God, as it were, where not only do we delight in him, but he delights in us. Author Chris Coursey says:

The Good News of the Gospel is that we have a God whose face lights up to see us and He beckons us to draw near.¹³

In fact, for the past few decades, a community of Christian neuroscientists have been discovering that relational joy—rooted in a relationship with God where we learn to abide in his loving presence—is from a brain science perspective the fundamental ingredient in our growth in loving, Christlike character.¹⁴

In the weeks to come, we’re aiming to share some practical take-home exercises that will help you grow in relational joy with God as well as with others.

Because biblical joy is profoundly relational.

Next:

2. Biblical joy is attentive to and grateful for God’s goodness.

Joyful people learn to count their blessings, recognizing with gratitude that such blessings are signs of God’s goodness and love.

Pastoral theologian Mary Clark Moschella explains that:

Joy comes down to this: to being awake and deeply alive, aware of the love and goodness of God, and mindful of the wondrous gift of life... Whether encountered through nature, art, prayer, work, play, or human relationship... experiences of joy in this sense... are needed to feed and sustain us in sorrow, and to open in us pathways to the love of God and neighbour... Joy includes: Attentiveness to moments, people and the good; a capacity for gratitude and wonder.¹⁵

The spirit of joy is found in the psalmist who writes:

¹² Psalm 16:11b (NASB)

¹³ Chris M. Coursey, *Transforming Fellowship: 19 Brain Skills that Build Joyful Community*, p. 54.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7.

¹⁵ Mary Clark Moschella, *Joy and Human Flourishing*, p. 101, 103, 112.

Praise the Lord, my soul,
and forget not all his benefits... ¹⁶

In another example, we see that the psalmist is attentive to and grateful for God's everyday blessings in creation when he writes:

You cause grass to grow for the livestock
and plants for people to use.
You allow them to produce food from the earth—
wine to make them glad,
olive oil to soothe their skin,
and bread to give them strength. ¹⁷

Sometimes grateful joy comes in the form of deliverance from a crisis. King David once wrote:

O Lord my God, I cried to you for help,
and you restored my health...
You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing. ¹⁸

Have you ever practiced gratitude in some way, shape or form? Some people keep a gratitude journal, making a list of, say, 5 things each day for which they're grateful to God. It can be amazing the joy that such a simple habit can bring.

Research professor and author Brené Brown, says that one of the most important things she has found in her research has to do with the relationship between joy and gratitude. She explains

I did not interview one person who had described themselves as joyful, who also did not actively practice gratitude. For me it was very counterintuitive because I went into the research thinking that the relationship between joy and gratitude was: if you are joyful, you should be grateful. But it wasn't that way at all. Instead, practicing gratitude invites joy into our lives... There is a great quote by a Jesuit priest that says, "It's not joy that makes us grateful, it's gratitude that makes us joyful." I guess I was just amazed to see that bubble up in my research so quickly. It's life changing. ¹⁹

¹⁶ Psalm 103:2 (NIV)

¹⁷ Psalm 104:14-15 (NLT)

¹⁸ Psalm 30:2, 11a (NLT)

¹⁹ Brené Brown, [Brené Brown on Joy and Gratitude](#).

Having said that, it is incredibly important to realize that:

3. Biblical joy is not dependent on circumstances.

This makes Christian joy distinct from the world's concept of happiness.

The world believes that happiness is about my circumstances falling into place the way I hoped they would. But the Bible tells us in Romans that:

We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.²⁰

So Christian joy is not based on circumstances, which are always changing. Christian joy is based on God's changeless love for us in Jesus.

For this very reason, the Bible actually *commands* us to rejoice. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, which he wrote from prison, we're exhorted to, "Rejoice in the Lord always."²¹

Not just when our circumstances are favourable— but always.

In commanding all followers of Jesus to rejoice, Paul's not saying, "Be masochists who delight in hardship for the sake of hardship." He commands us to rejoice in the Lord always because to do so is a sure sign that we've come to the point where Jesus alone has become our heart's greatest joy, and we know that nothing can ever separate us from his love.²²

Not only can Christian joy be maintained when the circumstances of life are unfavourable, but our sufferings can quite often cause our joy to increase. How can that be, you ask?

Well, by God's grace, our sufferings can become the servant of our greater joy by forging in us greater closeness with the Lord, and greater endurance, character, and hope, like they did for the Apostle Paul.

²⁰ Romans 5:3-5

²¹ See Philippians 4:4

²² See Romans 8:38

That being said, it's vitally important to understand that:

4. Biblical joy is emotionally honest.

To say that we are to rejoice *in* our sufferings is not to say that we rejoice *for* our sufferings. Not at all.

From cover to cover the Bible calls us to emotional honesty when it comes to our own pain and suffering, and that of the fallen world in which we live. The psalms, for example, give us prayer language that allows us to express the full gamut of human emotion, including anger, fear, and sorrow, along with joy, contentment, and hope.

And although Jesus was a person of great joy, he also wept and turned over the tables of the money changers in righteous anger. What did Jesus say in the Garden of Gethsemane as he faced his cross? "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death."²³ As his followers, we do well to emulate the emotional honesty of our Lord.

But while we are to respond to brokenness and loss with appropriate emotional honesty, we are not called to set up permanent camp there. As Christians, our true emotional home is joy. In John chapter 16, not long before he goes to his cross, Jesus says to his disciples:

I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn over what is going to happen to me, but the world will rejoice. You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn to wonderful joy. It will be like a woman suffering the pains of labor. When her child is born, her anguish gives way to joy because she has brought a new baby into the world. So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy.²⁴

When Jesus was crucified, his disciples were filled with grief, but when Jesus rose from the dead, they were filled with a joy that no one could take away, because God's new creation had begun. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, a new world is being born—a world where ultimately, all death and grief, pain and sorrow, will come to an end.

Our joy now in the midst of the world's deep fragmentation is a foretaste of the eternal joy that we will know when Jesus returns and sets the whole world right, once and for all. Yes, for now we live in a broken world, and sometimes we feel fear, discouragement and sorrow. But to borrow the words of my former professor Gordon Smith, as followers of Jesus:

²³ See Mark 14:34

²⁴ John 16:20-22 (NLT)

Sorrow does not define us. It is not the central emotional space in which we live... We were designed to live in joy. Because of... the redemption of creation through the cross and the assurance of this redemption in the resurrection, joy is our “default mode.”²⁵ [19:30]

Fifthly, and finally:

5. Biblical joy includes loving service to others.

In Galatians 5, Paul lists a set of virtues known as the fruit of the Spirit. He says:

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.²⁶

There are other virtue lists like this in the New Testament, and Bible scholars say that in such lists, the primary virtues—the most important ones from which all the others flow—can be found at the top of the list.

What are the two virtues at the top of this list? *Love* and *joy*. From these, all the other virtues flow.

But the list also shows us that joy follows love. It flows from love, because, as we’ve seen, joy is relational.

Particularly, joy flows from serving others in Christ-like self-sacrificial love. You get joy from giving your life away for the sake of others, rather than hoarding it to yourself.

This may sound counterintuitive, but it really shouldn’t come as a surprise if you have any familiarity with the Bible.

In Luke 15— Jesus tells three successive parables about a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son.²⁷ And the emphasis of these parables is that God the Father rejoices and all heaven throws a party when just one sinner turns to God in repentance. The invitation of the passage is for you and me to join God in his mission to seek and save the lost through Christ, and in doing so, we will be able to share in God’s joy when the lost are found.

Along the same lines, in Hebrews, the Bible says of Jesus that:

²⁵ Gordon T. Smith, *Called to Be Saints: An Invitation to Christian Maturity*, p. 157.

²⁶ Galatians 5:22-23a (NLT)

²⁷ See Luke 15:1-32

Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.²⁸

What was the joy awaiting Jesus? It was the joy of your salvation and mine, and that of all those who would come to be rescued from sin and death through his cross and resurrection. It was the joy of a renewed world—a world of perfect *shalom*, where, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

New Testament scholar Marianne Meye Thompson explains that our joy is linked to and dependent upon our participation in God’s mission to restore this world and its people to *shalom* in Christ.²⁹

I trust that those of us who have served in that mission over the years here at Cornerstone have grown in joy because of that service.

For my part in it, when I look at how far God has brought us as a church, and when I see God using this church to bless the lives of an ever-growing number of people, I’m filled with joy. I don’t dwell on what my part in it has cost me over the years. I don’t dwell on the sacrifice.

Sure, I’ve felt pain and discouragement in ministry—sometimes deeply so. But as I serve here, that’s not my emotional dwelling place, because I get to join God in his joy at all the life transformation that’s happened throughout the years through the ministries of this church.

Is God inviting you to share in his joy by serving others in love? Maybe God would have you start at home, with your spouse, your kids, your siblings. Is there someone in need at work or school or in your neighbourhood that God would have you serve in love?

Maybe God is inviting you to explore serving opportunities here at Cornerstone. To find out more, check out the serve page on our website: www.cornerstonechurch.ca/serve.

However God may lead you, remember, true biblical joy will always include loving service to others.

Communion

²⁸ Hebrews 12:2b (NLT)

²⁹ Marianne Meye Thompson, *Joy and Human Flourishing*, p. 35.

With that, we come to the Lord's Supper.

As we get ready to meet Jesus at his Table today, we're reminded that joy is profoundly relational. The word communion literally means "union together." It is a celebration of our union with Jesus—our relationship with him—and also of the relationship we share with each other through him.

At the same time, we're reminded that gratitude makes us joyful, because the Lord's Supper is a feast of thanksgiving. Some churches actually call it the *Eucharist*, which comes from the biblical Greek word for thanksgiving. When we come to the Table, we are of course thankful above all for Jesus sacrifice—his body broken and blood shed for us.

Whatever our circumstances of life, whatever our pain, nothing can separate us from the love God has for us in Jesus, and the proof of that love is embodied in the bread and in the cup. Even as we give thanks for Jesus, God's greatest gift, we also give thanks for countless other blessings God has showered on us, and as we do, we find ourselves filled with the joy of the Lord, which is our strength.

Finally, the Lord's Supper points ahead to the banquet we will share with Jesus and with each other in the new heavens and the new earth when he comes again to set the whole world right once and for all. This is a meal that looks forward, anticipating that day when our joy in Jesus will be made complete, because at that time, because of him, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well."