

**Sermon – Count Your Blessings**  
**Sunday January 15, 2023**

On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you rate yourself at being joyful?

I think my wife Joanne is a 10 – and I’m not just talking about being joyful! But seriously, she’s one of the most joyful people I know. She’s always smiling, laughing and planning fun things.

My side of the family is more serious. But since we got married, Jo has brought so much joy to our family dinners. Our Christmas dinners used to be just sitting around and eating but when Jo’s there, we laugh and play silly games. In my family, Jo is known as the joyful one.

Me on the other hand, I’m definitely not as joyful as Jo. I tend to sit in my feelings a bit longer. I’m not always as quick to see the bright side of things. And I don’t have the easy knack of making everything so fun.

You see, part of me has always gravitated to sad things. As a teenager, I listened to sad love songs. I watched sad movies. And I love the quote by Victor Hugo that says, Melancholy is the happiness of sad.

And yet joy is at the heart of God’s character and you and I are called to be joyful.

So what does this mean for people like me who aren’t as naturally joyful? Does it mean we’re less spiritual? Does it mean we’ll never get there?

Here’s the good news. Biblical joy is an inner quality; it’s something the Holy Spirit produces in us. So it’s not limited by our personality, it’s rooted in God and what he’s done for us.

So how can we experience more joy regardless of our personality and circumstances?

We’re in a series called *The Joy of the Lord is our Strength*. Each week, we’re going to unpack a different aspect of biblical joy and explore what it means for us.

As another way to grow in joy, we’re also encouraging all our small groups to do a study called *Resilient*. It’s been a tough time for all of us so in this 5-week study, you’ll learn how to receive the resilience God wants to give you so that he can restore your soul and you can experience the joy you were designed for.

If you’re in a small group, you would have received an email with all the details but if you have questions, you can email me.

If you’re interested but you’re not in a small group, we’re running a **Resilient Semester Group** that starts on January 31<sup>st</sup>. So go check out the information on the screen if you’re interested.

**<https://cornerstonechurch.ca/resilient/>**

But today, we’re continuing to talk about joy. What I want to do is look at some Old Testament passages that show us where we can find joy. Then I want to talk about a practice that will help us live more deeply into God’s joy.

Let’s start with this question: What brings you joy?

For me, it's a shawarma. Especially if it's from a restaurant in Ottawa called Shawarma Palace! Shawarma is a Middle Eastern dish. It's made by marinating sliced meat with spices and seasonings. It's stacked through a spit and slowly cooked for hours.

When it's ready, the tender mouth-watering meat is sliced off the spit and put it on a plate. They add seasoned roasted potatoes, rice, tabbouleh, dollops of hummus and garlic sauce and slices of pickled cucumbers, onions and turnips.

Shawarma Palace is my happy place! I once ate a shawarma plate from there every day for four days from each of their four locations. I also recently learned that these plates aren't supposed to be consumed by a single person; they're supposed to be shared by at least two people!

Anyway, shawarma gives me joy! How about you - what gives you joy?

- Quality time with family and friends?
- Going away on a trip?
- Lying on a beach
- Going for a walk?
- Listening to music?
- Playing sports, cooking or doing a hobby?

Noticing the things that bring joy is a recurring theme in the Old Testament.

In Genesis 1 it says, **God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. (Genesis 1:31)**

God created a good world. So naturally, we'll find joy in many good things.

- Psalm 65 says there's joy in having a large flock of animals and an abundant harvest of grain
- Psalm 104 says there's joy in drinking good wine
- Exodus 4 says there's joy in seeing our relatives
- Jeremiah says there's joy in a wedding celebration
- Proverbs says there's joy in our children and when we receive a kind word from a friend

God has created a good world. Even though it's fallen and won't be fully restored until Jesus returns, it's still full of beauty and goodness. And God wants you to enjoy it!

How do you do that?

Research professor and author Brene Brown has done extensive research on the topic of joy. She began her research thinking that joy produces gratitude. In other words, if you're a joyful person then you're a grateful person. But what she discovered didn't support this hypothesis.

After 12 years of research, analyzing 11,000 pieces of data and conducting countless interviews, she discovered that the relationship between joy and gratitude was reversed. Joy doesn't produce gratitude. **Gratitude produces joy.**

What does this mean? It means joy isn't just limited to people with naturally joyful personalities. Anyone can experience joy. So what's the secret? Gratitude.

The theme of gratitude appears throughout the Bible.

...give thanks in all circumstance (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

... continue to live your lives in him... overflowing with thankfulness. (Colossians 2:6-7)

**Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. (Philippians 4:6)**

God wants us to give thanks not only because it acknowledges his goodness. But because gratitude produces joy.

Scientific research supports this. In one study, researchers working with depressed people did an experiment. They divided their patients into two groups. Both groups were given journals and told to write in them every day.

The first group was told to write down things they were grateful for. The second group was told to write down things that bothered them.

At the end of the study, can you guess which group did better? Researchers found that the first group recovered faster and reported greater feelings of happiness. The second group felt worse and reported greater feelings of despair.

So how does gratitude make a difference?

According to the Mindfulness Awareness Research Center of UCLA, gratitude actually changes your brain. It turns out that joy isn't primarily about your personality; **Joy is about what you focus on.**

Here's how it works. When you practice gratitude, your brain automatically redirects what you think about. Instead of focusing on the negative, you focus on the good things in your life.

So what difference does that make? When you focus on good things, your body releases dopamine and serotonin, two important chemicals responsible for your emotions and making you feel good.

In other words, gratitude literally changes your brain. It strengthens your neural pathways, changes how you see yourself and the world and releases neurotransmitters that make you feel good.

In other words, gratitude produces joy.

Right after Jo and I got married we had our honeymoon in Italy. After our Mediterranean cruise, we travelled around Florence, Venice and Rome. I can't tell you how over the moon I was! I was married to my beautiful bride and best friend, we were on our honeymoon together and we were in Italy - one of the most beautiful places in the world!

But one couple on our bus tour didn't feel the same way. They complained about everything! How Italy didn't have enough air conditioning, McDonald's restaurants and people who could speak English.

After coming back from one attraction, we all got back on the tour bus. But that couple made a big stink because other people were now sitting in the seats they were sitting in before we got off the bus – even though there wasn't assigned seating.

So do you know what they did? They grudgingly took the seats behind their old seats, and until we arrived at our next destination – they continuously punched the back of the seats in front of them!

When we finally got to the next stop, we all got off the bus. All except this old couple. They ran back to their old seats and stayed on the bus so that no one else could take their seats again!

Isn't that crazy? There were so many great things they could have experienced in Italy but instead they focused on their seats on the bus. We all had the same opportunity to have a great time and we all did – except for this couple. Why?

Because they refused to get off the bus.

How many of you think they're foolish? But do you realize that you and I do the same thing? We might not throw away a trip to Italy, but we miss out on joy when we focus on the wrong things.

- When we focus on what we don't have instead of on what we do have.
- When we focus on what isn't working instead of what is working.
- When we focus on our mistakes instead of what we can learn from them.
- When we focus on our problems instead of our opportunities.
- When we focus on all that the bad things in our life instead of on the One who works good in all things.

The Bible says that the joy of the Lord is our strength. I wonder how many of us are missing out on this joy because we're still sitting on the bus.

Turn to your neighbour and say: *Get off the bus!*

So how do we get off the bus and enjoy our vacation? By practicing gratitude.

In Psalm 100, the psalmist says:

**Enter his gates with thanksgiving  
and his courts with praise;  
give thanks to him and praise his name. (Psalm 100:4)**

In this psalm, gratitude literally ushers us into God's presence. When we practice gratitude, God

- breathes hope into our thoughts,
- joy into our emotions
- and purpose into our life.
- God lifts our eyes above our circumstances,
- gives us new perspective
- and opens our hearts and minds to receive.

One Bible scholar says: **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. (Mary Clark Moschella)**

In Psalm 103, the psalmist says: **Praise the LORD, my soul, and forget not all his benefits... (Psalm 103:2)**

The psalmist goes on to list the things he's grateful for. What are you grateful for?

- I'm grateful for the generosity of Cornerstone people and how our general offering for 2022 came in \$89,000 over budgeted expenses.

- I'm grateful for all the many new people who are checking out Cornerstone and growing in their faith.
- I'm grateful for reconnecting with old university friends.
- I'm grateful for all the friends, youth group leaders and mentors who are pouring into the lives of my daughters.
- I'm grateful that our family will be going on our first missions trip together this March.

What are you grateful for? Turn to your neighbour and tell them one thing you're grateful for.

Gratitude produces joy because joy is determined by what you focus on. So how can you make gratitude a regular practice? Here are a few ideas:

1. **Keep a gratitude journal.** Spend a few minutes each day reflecting on the good things in your life and writing them down.
2. **Write a prayer of thanksgiving to God.** Think about the ways God has blessed you and thank him for what he's done.
3. **Send an appreciation note to someone.** Reach out to a colleague, friend or family member, and tell them what you appreciate about them.

There are so many ways to practice gratitude.

This year, every night I've been writing down one thing I'm thankful for on a slip of paper and putting it in a Gratitude Jar.

Jo starts off every day with what she calls a Toe Wiggle Prayer. When she wakes up, she wiggles her toes and thanks God for giving her another day.

There are so many good things we can be grateful for. When we pay attention and give thanks, our gratitude produces joy.

But what do you do when the things that give you joy are taken from you?

This was David. Near the end of his life, his son Absalom rebels against him. He tries to kill his father and become king. So David is on the run. It's during this time that he writes Psalm 4. Even with everything he's going through, David concludes his psalm with this prayer.

**... Let the light of your face shine on us.**

**<sup>7</sup> Fill my heart with joy**

**when their grain and new wine abound. (Psalm 4:6-7)**

David has lost everything - his job, his family, his friends, his money, his influence. And yet there's one thing he still has... his joy.

How is this possible? It's because this isn't a joy that we find in other things. It's a deeper joy. Other translators say it's more joy than his enemies have in all their grain and wine.

So where does David find this deeper joy? In God's presence. This joy comes not from the gifts, but from the Giver himself.

Verse 6 says Let the light of your face shine on us.

The Hebrew word for *face* is the word *panim*. *Panim* is one of the most commonly used words in the Hebrew Bible. It shows up over 2100 times and it's translated here as face but in other places as presence.

Because in the Bible, the face of God brings us joy.

Psalm 16 says: **...you will fill me with joy in your presence, (Psalm 16:11)**

Psalm 21 says: **...you have...made him glad with the joy of your presence. (Psalm 21:6)**

In both these passages, any guesses what Hebrew word David uses here for "presence"? The word *panim* or face. Because **the face of God brings us joy.**

So what's the significance of God's face?

Author Jim Wilder gives an insightful perspective. He says that joy is transmitted primarily through the face. Just imagine looking into the face of a loved one. When you see their eyes, their smile, their expression and you see how happy they are to see you, what happens to you? Your whole being radiates joy!

I like how Dr. Allan Schore defines joy. He says that Joy is what I feel when I see the sparkle in someone's eye that conveys "I'm happy to be with you"!

Turn to your neighbour and say "I'm happy to be with you". Now turn to your neighbour on the other side and say, "But I'm *really* happy to be with you!"

In a famous study known as the "Still Face" Experiment, a baby and her mother are sitting face-to-face. The mother's playing, smiling and talking to her baby.

Then the experiment starts. The mother turns away and when she turns back, for two minutes her face is uncaring and unresponsive. At first the baby is confused. Then she tries to get a response from her mother.

She then gets frustrated and distressed. She begins to cry and scream. She bites her own hand in an effort to self-soothe. But by the, the baby is withdrawn and hopeless. She doesn't even try to get her mother's attention.

Now when the two minutes are up, the mother begins to smile again and play with her baby. Then something remarkable happens. The baby is now giddy with joy. She can regulate her emotions and play happily again – why?

- Because she sees her mother's face.
- She sees her smile.
- She sees the sparkle in her eyes that say I'm so happy to be with you!

It's been a hard year. Like David, many of you have had losses. Losses in your marriage, your family, your work. Losses in your friendships, your health, your confidence. It's not going to be an easy road and it feels like the things that gave you joy have been taken away. But like David, you have a deeper joy.

Where do you find this joy? In God's presence. Because the face of God brings us joy.

Listen to how Wilder paraphrases Psalm 16:11, **When your face lights up because You are so happy to be with me, You fill me up with joy! (Psalm 16:11, Wilder paraphrase)**

The face of God brings us joy.

We've been looking at Old Testament passages so far, but I want to turn now to a New Testament passage.

In 2 Corinthians 4, Paul says **For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"<sup>[a]</sup> made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. (2 Cor 4:6)**

Who is this Christ?

He is Jesus, the sinless son of God. Who came for sinners like me – who are hurting, broken and tired. He came to bring light into our darkness. And he did it by dying on the cross for you and for me so that we can have life, so that we can have joy.

Listen to how Wilder paraphrases John 15:

**My father's face lights up when he sees me because I'm so special to him. I'm telling you this so that you will feel how special you are to my Father and to Me. Our faces are shining on you with delight. (John 15:10-11, Wilder paraphrase)**

God's face brings us joy.

Helen Lemmel was the daughter of a Methodist pastor and moved from England to the US in 1876. She was a brilliant singer and musician. In 1907, she went to Germany for vocal training where she met and married her husband. They moved back to the US in 1911 where she continued singing in church concerts.

But then tragedy struck. She developed a disease that made her blind. Her husband couldn't deal with it so he left her. Just like that, Helen lost her health, her vision and her marriage. But like David, there was one thing she still had – joy!

She continued to write poems and set them to music. She died at the age of 97 after writing over 500 hymns.

We're going to close now and the worship team is going to sing the chorus of one of her hymns. As you listen, let the words wash over you and lead you into God's loving presence.

Turn your eyes upon Jesus  
Look full in his wonderful face  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of his glory and grace.