

When Have You Known Joy?



A morning in January of 2021 found me thinking after spending the night as a volunteer in a homeless shelter. In the middle of a pandemic after a year of social unrest, wildfires, and natural disasters, we still have homelessness and hunger. We have a lot of problems in this world, and it may seem odd to write on the topic of joy. On the other hand, it really isn't such a stretch, joy is often connected with unpleasant things.

Joy is hard to define or describe and even harder to understand. Joy needs to be experienced rather than studied. It's not something you can take apart to analyze, but there are a couple of things that I found in the biblical book of Nehemiah that moved me closer to understanding the concept of joy. The prophet Nehemiah had brought a group of people back from Babylon after more than seventy years of captivity. Their goal was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. In the best of times, it

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would have been a significant undertaking, but this was not the best of times. Enemies opposed them, trying to keep the wall from being completed. The work was hard but made even more difficult when workers were required to be armed with swords and spears in case of attack. Despite their hardships, Nehemiah, who was their governor, declared a feast according to the eighth chapter of the book. He told the people, “Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

There are two things remarkable in this statement. The first is that joy comes from God. I believe He is the ultimate source of joy; it is his gift. Please understand I am not suggesting that only religious people can experience joy. It is God’s gift to everyone, all of the people He created, not only the ones who acknowledge him. Just like He gives us the air to breathe, He gives us all the capacity to experience joy. The other thing is that joy is strength. It isn’t some namby-pamby sentimental emotion; it is strength. It’s the thing that gives us the power to go on when things are hard. It’s the thing that gives us hope, and without hope, we’re lost. Beyond that, I can add little to further analyze or describe joy.

Understanding joy does not come from analysis but by experiencing. So I have chosen three examples from my own life, times I remember experiencing joy. There have been many others, but these three may serve as illustrations.

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The first example was as a little boy. Sixty years ago, we didn't carry phones in our pockets. Telephones weren't cordless; they had to be wired into the wall; the cords didn't even have handy plugs at the end. You had to connect the wire inside the receptacle using a screwdriver. Some phones were mounted permanently on the wall. Even if they weren't solidly attached, you could only move them as far as the cord would reach, and most cords were no longer than six feet.

My family's house had a large living room, and my mother thought she should be able to sit anywhere in that living room to talk on the phone. Mom was a force to be reckoned with, and when she got an idea, she generally found a way to make it happen. Somewhere she hunted down a cord that was long enough for her needs. We could now use the phone anywhere in the room – life was good. However, there was a downside to a twenty-five-foot cord. It was easily tangled. So there was a rule in our house, we kids were not allowed to play with the phone cord. It was to be left neatly behind the little stand holding the phone.

I can't tell you how it happened. I don't even know why it happened. And I can't imagine what possessed my mother to think it was a good idea, but the very thought of it still brings a smile to my lips. The memory is as fresh as though it happened

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last week. My mother was twirling that cord from one end as an older sister twirled the other, and the rest of us were jumping rope. I remember laughing hysterically until my sides hurt because it was so random and wonderful. It was out of character for my mother, who was usually quite serious. Looking back, I remember the joy.

You may be thinking, “Oh, you just really liked to jump rope.” No, for a kid who was a bit of a klutz, jumping rope wasn’t something I cared about. What I did care about was my family. My sisters and mom were laughing, and we were all playing together. Looking back at examples of joy in my life, they all revolve around relationships.

Several years later, I was invited to a party at the Methodist Church. It was put on by their youth group — probably for a holiday, but I don’t remember which one. I wasn’t part of that youth group, even though we all went to the same high school of only about 200 students. I knew everybody in school but didn’t feel like I fit in with the other kids. I didn’t have many close friends and felt like most kids didn’t like me. I wasn’t good at sports and was kind of a nerd, always picked on but never picked for a team. High school wasn’t really my favorite time.

While walking from my house to the party, I decided that this night would be different. Tonight I was going to be myself, and I

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was not going to try to get anybody to like me. Please understand, I wanted people to like me, and sometimes I would try to be more like them, or I'd try to act cool. But I decided on the way to that church party that I wasn't going to do anything of the sort. I was going to be myself, and if they liked me, fine. If not, that was fine too. I didn't even care if I had fun. I was just going to relax and be myself. Looking back, I don't remember anything that happened at the party, but I remember having fun. I remember thinking on the way home that it was the best party I had ever attended.

Looking back, I see that joy doesn't come from just any relationship. Joy comes from honest relationships. If you try to make yourself look good, you're not going to experience much joy. If you're trying to advance yourself or act like something you're not, you won't have much joy. It doesn't come by just being around people, and it doesn't come by making others like you. Joy comes from honest relationships, the kind that allows you to not only know but even more to be known.

The third example of joy might surprise you. It involves some discomfort and a certain amount of pain. August of 2017 found me driving a van filled with junior high students on the way to summer camp. Having just started to work with the church youth group, almost all the kids were strangers to me, and helping out at summer camp seemed a great opportunity to get to know

them. Driving up the freeway deafened by the din of excited junior highers made me rethink my decision. “Lord, how am I going to build relationships with these kids when I’m their grandfather’s age?”

The first day at camp was relatively uneventful. We had a slip and slide set up on the activity field. A huge piece of plastic sheeting covered with baby shampoo and water made a surface upon which nobody could keep their feet under them. It looked like a lot of fun, but I was behaving myself, knowing that playing on something designed to make you fall might not be a wise endeavor for an old man. The next day, I could stand it no more. At lunch, I announced to the boys near me, “You guys were having way too much fun without me yesterday. I’m going to so be in the middle of you today.” One boy asked if I’d go on the climbing wall and zip line with him. Of course! With over 20 years as a scoutmaster, climbing walls and zip lines were no problem.

After lunch, I was helping one of the other leaders, a young man a third of my age, carry the bundled-up sheet of plastic still slippery from the day before. I started to lose my grip and took a quick step to keep my hold. My left foot came down on a slick piece of plastic and shot out from under me while the right foot remained solidly on the ground. I felt the bones in my lower leg snap, and everyone within sight heard a sound like a large tree

limb suddenly breaking off. Something else happened at that moment. I felt God speaking to me. I have never heard God speak in an audible voice, but there have been a few times in my life I knew what He was saying to me. The message this time was clear, “You know,” and I swear He took a dramatic pause, “I did this on purpose. I have my reasons. You just sit back, relax and enjoy it.” Then I hit the ground.

As soon as I landed, there was an overwhelming feeling of calm. Was it shock? My years of scouting experience had come with a lot of first aid training that included several courses in mountaineering medicine. Going through the symptoms of shock in my head, not one of them matched. I wasn't in shock; I was just at peace. One of the other leaders said, “I can't believe you're so calm.” I said, “I could yell and scream if you want, but it wouldn't make any difference.” They got me to the hospital, where a splint was applied, and a few days later, a surgeon put a titanium rod through the tibia from knee to ankle. Five years later, there is still occasional pain.

So, where's the joy? Remember my unspoken prayer in the noisy van? How was an old man going to have a relationship with a bunch of rowdy kids? All the kids on that activity field heard the sound of the bones breaking and spun around. They saw me fall and that my leg was at about a 30-degree angle. At that moment, I was their granddad, and we had a relationship. It was

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wonderful and happened instantly, but it has also lasted throughout the years. I still have that kind of relationship with them. The kids currently in the youth group weren't even there in 2017, but they've heard the stories, and that seems to be enough.

I didn't really like the pain. Nobody should seek out pain, that's a sign of mental illness, but sometimes God uses pain in our lives to bring about something wonderful. Pain does not bring joy, but can't stop it either.

There's only one thing I know that absolutely stops joy: selfishness. You will not experience joy while thinking only of yourself. If you believe you are the most important person in the world and try to make everything work out for yourself, joy will elude you. Joy comes from relationships, and selfishness breaks them.

Joy is a gift, and as such, it is out of our control. Joy often comes upon us while we are simply living life as we believe it should be lived. Joy is a strength that can carry you through almost anything. Joy comes in through honest relationships. You can't manipulate your way to joy. Pain doesn't stop joy, but selfishness does.