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An Exchange of Joy



Tom Wells

*S*piritual direction is the help given by one Christian to another in living as a Christian and developing an awareness of God's presence. The one who gives help is often, but not necessarily, a member of the clergy and is often called a spiritual director or a soul-friend.

J. D. DOUGLAS, WALTER A. ELWELL, PETER TOON
IN *THE CONCISE DICTIONARY OF THE CHRISTIAN
TRADITION*

*D*iscipline without direction is drudgery.

DONALD S. WHITNEY

*D*iscipline is an index to doctrine.

TERTULLIAN

*M*any of us are used to seeing large numbers of people laughing on TV or elsewhere. Making people laugh is big business in the Western world. Most of us like to laugh, whether alone or with others. It is a funny world in more ways than one, so we laugh.

Equally important is the fact that we live in a tragic world. Since Adam's fall this world has been the scene of tragedy brought on by sin—individual, institutional, and societal. Even in the best of times tears often alternate with laughter. Our television producers work hard to give us reasons to laugh, but their news broadcasts amply supply us with scenes of sorrow, weeping, and wailing. Sympathetic spirits respond to those tears with tears of their own.

Let me take you back more than 2,400 years to a scene of weeping and crying in Israel. As the world sees things, Israel, a satellite of the Persian empire, was a minor player on the international scene. But God kept his eye on her and in his good providence he had returned three waves of exiles to their native land. The latest group, descendants of men and women that had been carried off to Babylon more than a hundred years before, had returned to Jerusalem with Nehemiah, the Persian governor. They found a dispirited Jewish community surrounded by bold enemies who mocked their efforts to

rebuild the walls of the city. And their foes did more than mock! As the Jews worked to the point of exhaustion their enemies said, "They will not know or see till we come among them and kill them and stop the work" (Nehemiah 4:11). Clearly this was a time of crisis. Though Nehemiah himself was a target of hatred, the wall was completed. With that bit of background we come to the tears.

After rebuilding the wall Nehemiah saw to it that the Book of the Law of Moses was read to the people.¹ For a half-day the people listened attentively to the reading. Here is the sequel:

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our LORD. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8:9-10).

The people wept and mourned. Why? Perhaps they saw that they had not kept the law God had given. That is reason enough for all of us to weep. Is there a solution to such weeping? There is! It is found in a twofold joy: God's people finding joy in God and God finding joy in his people.

OUR JOY IN GOD

"Do not be grieved," Nehemiah and the other leaders said, "for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (8:9). For our own spiritual formation and continued growth we must ask ourselves, what is the meaning of the phrase, *the joy of the LORD*?

In speaking above of a "twofold joy" I have already suggested an answer. The phrase, *the joy of the LORD*, is ambiguous. It may mean either our joy in God or his joy in us. Most likely here it means the joy God's people must find in God. The leaders were telling the people that they have had a great God

who enabled three waves of exiles to return from Babylon and had now permitted them to hear the Word of God read to them behind walls and gates that would withstand their immediate enemies. That was reason to dry their tears and to rejoice in their living LORD!

In telling his people (and us) to find strength in God, Nehemiah issued a call to continued faith in God. Faith, of course, must feed on knowledge. Where faith exists men and women of all ages have found joy in thinking on the attributes of God revealed in his word, such things as his love and faithfulness to his people and, as in this case, his power or strength to help in time of need. In words John Piper has written to preachers, "God is most glorified in our people when our people are most satisfied in Him."² That was the message of Nehemiah. What joy it is to find satisfaction in God! How much it pleases him! Such joy is strength to us, even in severest need.

David knew that God was a joy to his people who believe in him, and he found strength in that fact. In Psalm 28, after thinking on the deeds of the wicked and their indifference to God, David reflects on their sure destruction. Then he rejoices in the LORD:

Blessed be the LORD! For he has heard the voice of my pleas for mercy.

The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped;

My heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.

The LORD is the strength of his people; he is the saving refuge of his anointed (verses 6-8).

Notice how David unites the three great themes of faith in the LORD, the strength of the LORD, and the joy and strength the believer finds in his strength. Does David have faith? Yes, his heart trusts in God (verse 7). Does he find strength in God? He makes this plain in a number of ways. First, he calls the LORD his strength and adds the assurance that he has been helped by that strength (verse 6). Second, he assures the

people of God that the LORD is their strength as well (verse 8a). Third, he returns to his own role as God's anointed king who has found the LORD a "saving refuge" (verse 8b). Does he experience joy? Yes, we can feel it as he gives thanks for mercy (verse 6). More than that he speaks of his heart exulting (verse 7). The NIV translates this phrase, "My heart leaps for joy." The conclusion is clear: David finds his ultimate joy in God. To us who live in a world mad after pleasure, David beckons us to find our satisfaction and joy where he found his, in the character of our God. For us God has done two things to help us understand his character. He has given us his written Word and he has granted us the splendid sight of himself in Jesus Christ. If David had reason to rejoice in God—and he did—how much more reason have we!

Isaiah the prophet wrote in another difficult day. Judah was under siege by Assyria and all its cities seemed to be lost except Jerusalem. Surely the worst had come! That judgment, however, was a bit premature. The Lord rescued Jerusalem and Judah for another brief period. Nevertheless their fearful experience with Sennacherib's army was a foretaste of worse things to come. Looking far into the future, beyond Judah's captivity, Isaiah foresaw a day in which the people of God would find a renewed joy in the LORD.

You will say in that day: "I will give thanks to you, O LORD, for though you were angry with me, your anger turned away, that you might comfort me. Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation." With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation (12:1-3).

Isaiah wrote these prophetic words for the Messianic age, the age in which we live.³ It is the age in which we enjoy the knowledge that "for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). We now know that whatever amount of God's strength we need is actually exercised on our behalf. That does *not* mean that we are so cared for that we

may be indifferent to the way we live, as if we were robots without any influence on the course of our lives. Not at all! What it does mean is this: as we live our lives everything that we experience, *everything without exception*, does us good and meets our need(s).

Let me show you how this might work out in one or two hypothetical situations. Suppose we sin, as we all do sometimes. How might the Lord exercise his strength on us in light of what we have done? First perhaps, he will teach us humility through our failure in godliness. Then again, he may use this as an occasion for discipline. We need not fear discipline. It is not the bare display of justice which those without Christ may experience. No, it is training in godliness, even when it hurts. That is why Hebrews quotes these glowing words taken from Proverbs, "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives" (12:5-6). Discipline is a display of love. It is a family blessing. It is for sons and daughters, not slaves and strangers. Still further, he may well use our stumbling to teach us to know more fully joy and wonder at his mercy! His armory has an enormous inventory of useful reactions to sin.

It is no wonder then that Isaiah describes this age as an age of joyous praise to God. While celebrating the Lord's strength he imagines us breaking into a song of faith in the LORD arising from our salvation (verse 2). Then he adds a further description of what we will do, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (verse 3).⁴

TWO-WAY JOY

Before leaving the Old Testament let us take one more look at the Psalms. Here we will find a transition between the two joys I have spoken of earlier, our joy in God and his joy in us.

Let Israel be glad in his Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their King!

Let them praise his name with dancing, making melody to him with tambourine and lyre! For the LORD takes pleasure in his

people; he adorns the humble with salvation (Psalm 149:2-4).

Here we have a transition passage containing both joys that I have earlier mentioned. The Psalmist exhorts Israel to find gladness in her Maker and joy in her King. He prods them to express that joy, as Nehemiah would later do. You recall that Nehemiah urged men and women not only to feast themselves but also to "send portions to anyone who has nothing ready" (8:10). His people entered into the spirit of his words. We read that "all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing . . ." (8:12). The Psalmist tells his people to express their joy with dancing and musical instruments. We must not hide our joy in God!

But that is not all. The Lord finds joy in his people. He "takes pleasure" (ESV) or "delights" (NIV) in us.

THE LORD'S JOY IN US

Is it true? Does the Lord really rejoice in his people? Jesus taught us in the three parables of Luke 15 that he does. Do you remember the occasion for those parables? It was the grumbling of the Pharisees over Jesus receiving tax collectors and sinners and even eating with them. Horrors! But the Lord Jesus did not see things their way at all. Instead he told his hearers this story:

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost." Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance (Luke 15:4-7).⁵

Imagine it: There is joy in heaven over one lost sheep, one of God's elect, that is brought home! Who is it that rejoices?

The angels? Perhaps, but the parable at the end of the chapter, shows a father longing over a lost son, and rejoicing at the sight of him. In fact he "ran and embraced him and kissed him" (verse 20). Jesus made that Jewish father represent God. The Father finds joy in his wayward sons and daughters when he brings them home. The passage follows up his initial joy with further evidence of the Father's happiness, the bestowal of gifts. The father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:22-24). And celebrate they did!

The imagined scenes in the parables of Luke 15 are not for our amusement, but we must not dismiss them on that account. They too should bring to mind the words connected with other parables of Jesus, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15; Mark 4:9, etc.). This is doubly so because these parables speak to one of the greatest fears many Christians experience, the fear that God does not *greatly* love them. I have emphasized the word "greatly" because Christians generally agree that God loves his people, but that is not all. They often suspect that his crowning, thoughts, and acts of love belong to others. But what others? Those who are not *ordinary* Christians and those whose discipline in the Christian life sets them apart from the great mass of us.

Jerry Bridges tells a story from his own career that illustrates this point.⁶ He once arrived to preach at a church where one of the pastors had just passed away. Going into the senior pastor's study for prayer just prior to the morning service Bridges saw him lay his head on his desk and weep over the loss of his comrade. Suddenly Bridges realized that he must not preach the message he had prepared. Instead he would need to speak to the congregation on something related to the loss they had just suffered. But what?—that was the question. So he did what most any preacher would do in the same position, he cried to God for help. Almost immediately, however, another thought interrupted his prayer. What kind of a man before God had he been that day already? Had he spent

enough time in prayer? Had he been faithful in reading and meditating on the Scriptures that morning? In short, he was asking if God loved him enough to overlook the shortcomings that would keep him from receiving an answer to his desperate cry! Then something else happened. In his goodness God reminded Bridges that his love for a child of God in distress is not conditioned on that child's performance. With this warm assurance of God's loving concern in mind, he made the barest of outlines and the Lord used it to encourage his people that day.

Most of us have had fears arising from our own conscious failures, our persistent lack of "spirituality," as we like to call it. Knowledge of our shortcomings is a precious commodity—may the Lord never deliver us from it! But the knowledge of the Lord's continuing love for those who know him is more precious yet. And that continuing love is not as fragile as our assurance of it is. Paul speaks to this fact in Romans when he asks the question, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ" (8:35a)? Notice how he answers his own question. Instead of using the commands of God to show that we will not fail to carry them out, he does much the opposite. He lists the things that would most likely lead us to fail the Lord. "Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword" (8:35b)? And he answers with a resounding cry of triumph: "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (8:37). If God's grace is amazing in forgiving sinners, God's love is amazing in its exuberance over those sinners whose sins are forgiven. The evidence is found in his joy over believers, over *you*!

And what about Jesus? Does he find joy in his people, as they find joy in him? We have seen the answer already in reading of God's joy, for Jesus is not only man, but God. Perhaps that is why the writer to the Hebrews told us to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, "who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (12:2). If we ask what that joy was, the answer is likely to be complex. Surely it must have

started with the approval of his Father in the completion of his work.

But there is no reason to suppose that his joy stopped there. The work was inspired by the love of God for his world (John 3:16). As the God-man Jesus shared in God's plan from beginning to end, from its design to its execution. It was his joy to do so. Second only to the glory of God, this plan meant the salvation of countless millions. Did Jesus enjoy that fact? No doubt he did. Was there an exuberance in his joy over his people?

The answer must be yes, since part of the lasting legacy of the risen Lord to his disciples was joy. "But I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:22). Taking pleasure in giving them joy will be part of his joy forever.

CONCLUSION

Mutual responsibilities often suggest drudgery. The mere prospect of shared suffering hardly suggests delight. The command to "bear one another's burdens" (Galatians 6:2) suggests both privilege and sorrow. But these things are not the whole story. As we have seen, the Bible tells us of an exchange of joy between man and God that lubricates the friction of our daily walk, even in a world where "suffering, then glory" is the rule of life. And what is this glory to which we look in hope? In answer to this question words fail us. But the same God who rejoices in his people, and teaches us to rejoice in him, has left us a crowning promise in the words of Paul:

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:16-18).

Let us rejoice in the God who rejoices over us while we await the experience of eternal glory!

Author

Tom Wells is one of the pastors of The King's Chapel in West Chester, Ohio. He is the author of numerous books, including *Come to Me, Come Home Forever, God Is King, Christian: Take Heart, A Price for a People, A Vision for Missions, New Covenant Theology, Fresh Springs*, and *Faith: The Gift of God*. He is a conference speaker and a contributing editor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*. He lives in West Chester, Ohio, with his wife, Luann.

Notes

1. There is some doubt as to what the phrase, "the Book of the Law of Moses," includes. Probably it was portions of the Pentateuch, perhaps all of it.
2. John Piper, "Preaching to Suffering People" in Don Kistler, editor, *Feed My Sheep* (Morgan, Pennsylvania: Soli Deo Gloria, 2002), 241.
3. My point here is not to solve all the problems connected with various millennial views. It is simply to state my conviction that eschatology or "the last times" or "the messianic age" started with the first coming of Christ, regardless of whether or not there is a future millennium.
4. If you will excuse a personal reference, everyone in our family memorized this verse early in our family life because it contains the name of one of our daughters, Joy Wells. Isaiah revisits the subject of our joy in God in 61:10.
5. God finds a similar joy in the parable found in Matthew 18:12-14. There Jesus uses the same elements of a sheep and a shepherd, but it seems likely that this is a different parable focusing on "sheep," that is "little ones who believe" in Christ (verse 6). See the recent standard commentaries by Carson and Blomberg and also C. L. Blomberg, "When Is a Parallel Really a Parallel?" in *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (1984): 78-103.
6. Bridges told this story at the 2004 Bunyan Conference which I attended. It may not be in print.

We ought to pray often but briefly, lest if we are long about it our crafty foe may succeed in implanting something in our heart.

JOHN CASSIAN

Helplessness united with faith produces prayer, for without faith there can be no prayer.

OLE HALLESBY