

Foundational Essay

PRACTICE JOY

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INTRODUCTION

We usually think of joy as a feeling, a response to something we experience. We might feel joy when we witness a bright sunrise, laugh with a dear friend, or hold a sweet baby. But Scripture invites us to experience joy as more than a passive response. We are urged to practice joy as a faithful choice. As Jesus instructs his disciples before his crucifixion, our joy is not fulfilled by our own accomplishments but by the Lord alone: “[Ask] in my name . . . and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete” (John 16:24). And as Paul writes in Philippians 4:4—“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”—not because life is unfolding in a delightful way, but because, no matter what else may be happening, “the Lord is near” (Philippians 4:5).

The practice of joy is ancient, as witnessed by the Psalter, which urges joy’s expression in countless circumstances. Just as the earth itself and the trees of the forest sing for joy (Psalms 100:1; 96:12), so are we urged to take notice of God’s presence, and, wherever we are, “go to the altar of God, to God my exceeding joy” in the presence God’s glory (Psalm 43:4). We are also called to rejoice in and savor the undeserved mercy God gives to us: God turns our “mourning into dancing” (Psalm 30:11), so constantly being our help, that “in the shadow of [God’s] wings [we] sing for joy” (Psalm 63:7). In addition, it is not only God’s blessings to us that invite us to rejoice. The blessings of others are also causes for joy: the nations are called to sing for joy for all the peoples to whom God brings equity and guidance (Psalm 67:4). Still more crucially, we are called to rejoice, not only when we see evidence of God’s mercy, but especially when we experience times of danger, distress, grief, and fear. We are called to remember God’s faithfulness in the past, and trust it as a sign of God’s redemption still to come:

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. . . .
[O]ur mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy. . . .
Restore our fortunes. . . .
May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

—Psalm 126:1–5

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“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

—Matthew 5:10–12

The constancy of joy in God in times of trouble is echoed throughout history by the faithful. Dietrich Bonhoeffer's last letter to his friends, written in November 1942, begins by acknowledging the death of numerous faithful who died at the hands of the Nazis. Yet throughout the letter, he points to joy: “Joy abides with God, and it comes down from God and embraces spirit, soul, and body; and where this joy has seized a person, there it spreads, there it carries one away, there it bursts open closed doors.”¹

It is then that we are able to come to the fullest expression of joy; joy that does not depend on our circumstances but that celebrates God's presence everywhere and always.

In this essay, we will explore four practices of joy, attested to in the Psalms and manifested throughout Scripture:

- See Joy in God's Creation
- Rejoice in God's Mercy
- Share Others' Joy
- Practice Joy in All Times

SEE JOY IN GOD'S CREATION

Often it is not lack of faith but mere inattention that impedes our practice of joy. Even in the best of times, there are a thousand ordinary things that can distract us from the joy we find in God's presence. At times, we get caught up in the immediate tasks of our days, whether ordinary routines or unusual challenges. Our gaze focuses on our to-do lists: chores to be done, emails sent, phone calls returned, food prepared, family tended. At times, we simply grow so accustomed to our surroundings, and even our loved ones, that we no longer notice their particular features. Our attention veers to whatever novelty appears on the screen in front of us. We become anesthetized to feelings or senses altogether. We move through our day like zombies, numbed by stress or stagnation or constant distraction.

Faith invites us instead to *savor joy in God's glory*, to notice, with intention, God's presence in our midst. Psalm 65 encourages us to savor the abundant beauty of God's presence in nature, and to join in nature's songs of praise. To enter into nature's joy begins with noticing creation's beauty in countless ways. Wherever we are—to the earth's farthest bounds—creation summons our attention. We are urged to lift our eyes to: the gateways of morning sunrise and evening sunset, the roar of the waves and the strength of the mountains, the flow of the rivers and breadth of the plains, the abundant yield of watered grains, the pastures of the wilderness and hills

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1. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945* (Fortress, 2006), 377–78.

girded with joy. To notice the particular beauty of nature around us is an entrance into its joy, joy that reflects the presence of our Creator, the hand behind the beauty. As we savor the joy of creation, our senses are awakened; through God's gift of our senses of touch and smell, movement and stillness, even our breath itself, can we discover the presence of God in our midst. As we read Psalm 65, we are drawn to notice God's presence around us.

And as we pay attention, we might be surprised that we will also discover the joy of God's glory showing up in unexpected places. Scripture is filled with examples of startling encounters with God's presence. Once we are open, we might come closer to the way of Jesus, who said, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Matthew 13:44). So it is with us: in our joy at discovering God's presence right in front of us, the rest of our life comes into right perspective. In Genesis 28:11–22, after Jacob receives his father's blessing, he is sent to his uncle Laban's house. On his way, he rests for the night. As he sleeps, he dreams of a ladder whose top reaches to heaven, and God's angels ascend and descend on it; and he experiences the presence of the Lord, who blesses him. As Jacob awakens from sleep, he proclaims, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it! . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." He names the place Bethel, which means "the house of God." As we read this passage, it invites us to contemplate the unexpected places and times when we have felt the presence of God near us. Even more, it encourages us to consider how being open to God's presence not only brings momentary joy and awe but transforms our lives.

REJOICE IN GOD'S MERCY

Rejoicing in the ordinary—seeing signs of God's presence around us—prepares our hearts to be all the more grateful when we are given unexpected gifts of mercy. The causes of human pain are legion: some are of our own making, some are simply part of the natural order; there is also unnecessary pain brought by others. Sometimes our suffering is brief; at other times, the trauma lingers for years. Whatever our pain—illness, guilt, injustice, grief, loss, fear, hunger, helplessness, shame, poverty, or others—in every case, our ability to experience joy is understandably dulled. And while God would not will our suffering, it is precisely when God comes to us in our deep pain that we experience some of our most valuable moments of joy. In both individual and communal testimony, the Psalms express this poignant joy in many places.

For individuals who have suffered deeply, and found new life, the joy of Psalm 30:4–5 especially resonates:

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.
For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.
Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

It reminds us that, in times of prosperity, it is easy to dismiss our vulnerability or our reliance on the power of God. "As for me, I said in my prosperity, 'I shall never be moved'" (v. 6). But that security can fade in a

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heartbeat. Yet it is in these moments of profound humility that we discover again the joy that God’s presence alone can give (see Psalm 30:11–12):

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,
so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.


Psalm 30 invites us to recall and savor those times when we have needed God’s mercy, and received it with joy.

While most of us recognize that our individual experiences of God’s saving mercy lead to profound, unshakable joy, fewer of us—especially in places of privilege—know the deep joy of shared encounters with God’s grace. Yet this too is part of the practice of faith. Psalm 126:1–3 embodies the deep joy of shared restoration:

When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.
Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for them.”
The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.



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I am reminded of the experience of descendants of the Armenian genocide (which includes me). From 1915–1918, more than 1.5 million Armenians were slaughtered by the Ottoman Empire; millions more were displaced. Yet that horrific suffering has also brought a deep appreciation of the joys we now cherish, including the establishment of the Republic of Armenia in 1991. One writer expresses it this way:

“Our celebration of . . . Armenia’s independence is an opportunity for us to consider how fortunate we are. . . . Perhaps it is human nature to focus on what remains to be accomplished or what challenges remain. . . . We consume a great deal of our time on what the government is not doing, about the social ills of society and how empty our glass is. For a moment, let us think about how many generations dreamed about what we are experiencing. Since 1375, there have been a total of only 32 years when Armenia was recognized as a nation state. . . . The leaders in 1918 were trying to manage an impossible dilemma of disease, famine and military aggression, yet they endured. . . . While most post-Soviet republics became the sandbox of corrupt oligarchs, Armenia experienced a peaceful revolution of its citizens to move on from this Soviet hangover and accelerate the nation-building process. . . . we should all pause and remind ourselves of our good fortune especially in the historical context of our struggle. We live every day to advocate for improvements in the quality of life for the Armenian nation. . . . [We] thank God for the blessings we have received and . . . remember the sacrifices that have enabled the joy of freedom.”²

2. Stepan Piligian, “We are indeed fortunate. Happy Birthday, Armenia!” *Armenian Weekly* (September 23, 2020), <https://armenianweekly.com/2020/09/23/we-are-indeed-fortunate-happy-birthday-armenia/>.

When we have received God’s mercy—whether as individuals or collectively—we cannot help but rejoice. To remember, long after the moment of our salvation, is to continue to practice joy.


SHARE OTHERS’ JOY

The joy we feel when we are blessed is immediate and palpable. But joy is not only a private, interior experience. Even in our individualistic culture, we savor sharing special moments of joy with friends and neighbors—weddings, graduations, and more. Many of us also know the deep joy when a close loved one is blessed: with healing, opportunity, redemption, repaired relationships, or a thousand other things. As part of the Christian community, we are urged to share that same enthusiasm when anyone in our family of faith receives such providential grace. As Paul writes to the church in Rome, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). Similarly, he tells the Corinthians, “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26).


This same encouragement is found in Jesus’ teachings in Luke 15. As the parable begins, we can feel the delight of those who retrieve what had been lost: the shepherd who rescues his lost sheep, the woman who finds her lost coin. In both cases, when they find what was lost, they gather friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found [what was] lost” (vv. 6, 9). No doubt their friends and neighbors are delighted to share in this joy. But such joy requires compassion, recognizing the costly pain of the loss, and the profound relief to redeem what was lost. *Compassion*—the ability to hold someone else’s feelings as tenderly as if they were one’s own—is what Jesus calls us to do for one another.

But Jesus’ call for us to rejoice over others’ blessings does not end with those that are easy for us to celebrate. Instead, he presses us to rejoice even when we do not believe that someone’s blessing was deserved. The parable of the Prodigal Son, which follows in Luke 15:11–32, offers a profound example and invites us to consider the limits of our empathy. In the parable, the younger brother preemptively takes his inheritance and then squanders it in dissolute living. Only when he endures famine and has less to eat than the pigs he is hired to feed does he come to his senses and return to his father. He is prepared to confess his sins and be treated, not as a son, but as a hired hand. But as he returns, his father runs to welcome him home, not even waiting for a confession to express his love and joy. So filled with joy is the father that he holds an extravagant party for his lost son, returned to him. If these were the only two characters, the story might end simply. But an older brother is also part of the family—reliable, respectful, hard-working. And he is hurt and appalled that their father would welcome his younger brother home; it is neither fair, nor is it respectful of all the older brother has done. This story presses us to wonder: can we rejoice when someone we believe to be unworthy of forgiveness is welcomed back? Can we rejoice when someone we love and respect reconciles with someone we are leery of? What are the limits of our willingness and ability to “rejoice with those who rejoice”?

This does not mean shrugging off grave injustices; nor does it whitewash pain that we or those we love have endured. Instead, as we practice rejoicing in the blessings God extends to friends, strangers, and sometimes even enemies, we grow in empathy. Even more, we become all the more attuned to the undeserved blessings we have received. Rather than a zero-sum game, others’ blessings deepen our own appreciation of God’s grace,



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and cause us to trust it all the more—even, and especially, when God’s blessings seem far away.

PRACTICE JOY IN ALL TIMES

There are times in everyone’s life when joy feels impossible. Whether from our own errors, the choices of others, or the systems around us, the present feels grim at best—and at its worst, the future shows no end in sight. It is precisely then that our practice of joy—savoring God’s glory, rejoicing in God’s blessings to us, and rejoicing in others’ blessings—bears its greatest fruit.

Here Scripture comes to our aid especially, offering numerous examples of the faithful trusting in the joy of God’s promise. In Isaiah 51, the prophet urges the people in exile not to give up hope, in spite of every indication that there is no imminent relief. By looking back at God’s unending faithfulness in the past, we can trust in God’s promise of future restoration, a time of “joy and gladness” when “sorrow and sighing shall flee away” (Isaiah 51:11). This same urge to look back at God’s signs of faithfulness—not just for gratitude, but for the comfort of the joy of God’s promise—is found in many places in the prophets, as well as the New Testament. Hebrews 11 rehearses our lineage of faithfulness in spite of setbacks, and concludes in chapter 12 with the remembrance of Jesus’ confident joy:

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Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

—Hebrews 12:1–2

As we follow in Christ’s footsteps, we follow in confidence and joy at the future God has set before us.

Two New Testament passages are particularly compelling. First, in the Gospel of John, as Jesus faces the crucifixion, he gathers his disciples around him to warn them not only of his impending death but also “to keep you from stumbling” in the suffering to come (John 16:1), which will include expulsion from the synagogue and even murder. Yet, with the presence of the Holy Spirit, they will discover that pain is not the last word. In John 16:20–24, Jesus likens the present moment to the pain of childbirth: an anguish that is forgotten “because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world.” The joy of Christ’s resurrection is like this: “you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you.” Even after the resurrection and ascension, because of the Spirit’s presence, Christ has promised that everything they need will be given: “Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.”

This joy in God’s future continued to buoy the church, as is apparent in Paul’s letter to the Philippians. Paul is imprisoned because of his faith and has no expectation to be set free. Still, he urges the Christian community in Philippi to “stand firm in the Lord” (v. 1) in this way:

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. . . . The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to

God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

—Philippians 4:4–7

By thinking not of their distress, but instead, of all the evidences of God’s past blessings and current presence—whatever is true, honorable, just, and more—they too will find peace to carry them into the future.

Both passages invite us to remember that it is not just the past or the present where we find God’s blessings. Instead, we are urged to wonder: What is the future God desires for us and for our world? How do God’s promises of restoration and new life bring joy to us now, even in the midst of struggles? The practices of joy bear fruit in this: by savoring joy in God’s glorious presence, rejoicing in God’s blessings to us, and rejoicing in others’ blessings, we gain security in trusting that there is joy still to come. Not just passing joy, but eschatological joy. In the midst of whatever pain we endure in this season, we can trust that there is new life ahead, when sins are forgiven, justice is restored, and our broken world is once again made whole.

SUMMARY

Joy is not just a feeling; it is an act of faith. God’s glory is all around us; the practice of joy invites us to notice and savor it. God’s mercy has overflowed to us, as individuals and in community; the practice of joy encourages us to take notice and stand in awe of God’s grace. God’s blessings have embraced those around us, both enemies and friends; the practice of joy urges us to celebrate fully the abundant providence of God. In all these ways, we are equipped to rejoice in the future with anticipation of new life.

Bonhoeffer, in his last letter to his friends, encourages them this way:

“The joy of God has gone through the poverty of the manger and the agony of the cross; that is why it is invincible, irrefutable. It does not deny the anguish, when it is there, but finds God in the midst of it, in fact precisely there; it does not deny grave sin but finds forgiveness precisely in this way; it looks death straight in the eye, but it finds life precisely within it. What matters is this joy that has overcome.”³

In the end, the practice of joy is not just for our momentary happiness. It is far more: a lifelong practice of faithfulness that God is in the midst of us—and will lead us to the future still to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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3. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 16, *Conspiracy and Imprisonment: 1940–1945* (Fortress, 2006), 377–78 quoted in www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-invincible-irrefutable-joy.

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