

# DAY 1: JOY DEFINED

“But I have trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

Psalm 13:5-6 ESV

The Bible says a lot about joy – just look in a concordance and see how often the terms “joy,” “joyful,” and “rejoice” occur through scripture from beginning to end. So it is important for Christians to have a clear idea of what we’re talking about when it comes to joy.

A great place to start when exploring the meaning of a word is a dictionary (young people, a dictionary is a big book full of words that lets you know how they’re spelled and what they mean). According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, joy means:

“1 a: the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune or by the prospect of possessing what one desires : DELIGHT  
b: the expression or exhibition of such emotion : GAIETY  
2: a state of happiness or felicity : BLISS  
3: a source or cause of delight”

Reading through the many uses of joy in scripture, the word here that seems to best connect to the Bible’s meaning of joy is the term “delight.” We delight in God, then in His works and His gifts. We experience true joy when we hold tightly to Him and loosely to the things of this world.

To flesh out this idea, here are some aspects of joy we’ll explore in the next week.

**Joy is obedience.** We are commanded to be joyful; it is not optional.

**Joy is gratitude.** The easiest way to experience joy is to thank God.

**Joy is humility.** Proud people don’t feel real joy. Humble people do.

**Joy is trust.** Trusting God gives us the freedom to be joyful.

**Joy is a gift.** We don’t deserve joy, but God loves to give it.

God intends for His people to be characterized by joy and known for their joy. Our joy is a distinctive marker of who we are and a witness to the world that what we believe is true.

You might wonder: Is joy an emotion, like happiness? No. God commands us joy and promises us joy. Since we cannot always control our emotions, God doesn’t order us to *feel* a certain way. Joy is a conscious habit of delighting in God and living in light of His delight.

Joy is connected to our emotions, and it often leads to gladness. But if we're supposed to "Rejoice always," we must remember that "always" includes our very bad days and seasons of trials. We're not supposed to walk around with big fake grins, pretending that everything's okay. But we should have a deep confidence in God and trust that He is always up to something good. In this way, joy is more of a *decision* than an emotion, and it's something we can experience when we're happy in our circumstances and when we're not.

For the next five days, we'll fill out our definition of joy.

Prayer:

*Father, thank you for joy. Please increase my understanding and experience of joy. Remove anything that hinders me from delighting in you. Amen.*

Reflection questions:

How do you define joy? Do you experience it often?

## DAY 2: JOY IS OBEDIENCE

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.”

Philippians 4:4 ESV

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.”

Romans 12:12 ESV

**Joy is a command.** We don't usually think of rejoicing as an *order* from the Lord, but there it is, right in God's Word. Just as we're told to love our neighbors as ourselves, and not to murder, and to take care of the poor, we are commanded to practice joy. It seems strange, but in light of these verses, one can't escape the conclusion that if you aren't pursuing joy, you are being disobedient to God.

**Joy is a discipline to learn.** If joy is a command and a matter of Christian obedience, then it is a part of our ongoing sanctification; a process. In fact, it's a process that lasts until we are dead or Jesus returns. So joy is a spiritual skill that we can work on and improve at. When we know that joyfulness is a mindset to grow into, we don't have to be discouraged by the slowness of our progress. This is a marathon, not a sprint, and we will have opportunities to practice joy for the next few billion years.

**Joy is a battle.** Because joy is a spiritual matter, we can expect resistance from the dark powers of this fallen world. The battle over joy takes place on two fronts: from without and from within. The world around us is fallen, so we cannot find real joy there, only temporary happiness or distraction. We look forward to the day when Jesus will return to make all things new. So we have to battle, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, to cultivate joy in this broken world.

We are also attacked from within, as our own battered hearts tell us lies – about God, ourselves, and life – that would steal our joy. This battle is a fight to choose, over and over, not to believe hopeless thoughts, but to choose to trust in the character of God. He loved us enough to rescue us, so we can be sure He will see us through to an end in glory, whatever the road to get there is like.

**Joy is found in the Triune God.** Jesus' joy came from the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit, and our joy comes from Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit. We might look for joy in many places, but we will always be lacking until we look to God.

What does it mean to look to the triune God for our joy? We delight in Him. We ask Him for joy (He loves to answer prayers). We study His Word to learn the many reasons we can delight in Him. And we love our family the Church and delight in the community He's given us. When we know God, love God, and obey God, we will have joy that nothing in this world can take away.

Prayer:

*Father, thank you for joy. Give me strength to obey your command to cultivate joy. Crush the things that war against joy in me. And teach me to delight in you, whatever my outward circumstances. Amen.*

Reflection Questions:

What is stealing your joy today? How can you cultivate joy in your life?

## DAY 3: JOY IS GRATITUDE

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.”

I Thessalonians 5:16-18 ESV

A joyful person is a thankful person. Gratitude changes a person’s perspective on everything. And Christians have more reason to be grateful than anyone else on Earth.

How can we “give thanks in *all* circumstances”? Not by thanking God for evil things – God condemns sin because He is holy, and we’re to act and pray against brokenness. But we thank God that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28 ESV). Not everything is good, but everything can *work for good* if we surrender it to our sovereign God and trust Him with it.

If we are told to give thanks in every single circumstance, that means that there are *always* things to be thankful for. Even if things are going horribly – if you have suffered abuse or loss or poverty or sickness – you can still thank God for the gift of life, because to exist is better than to not exist. And you can thank God for salvation; He did not have to send Jesus to save us, but He did. And you can thank God for hope, that someday our suffering will be over and we will live in His glorious presence forever.

To be joyful people, we have to cultivate an attitude of thankfulness (some say “attitude of gratitude,” but not this writer). How can we do that? One way is to deliberately thank God in prayer whether you feel like it or not. In morning and evening prayers, make time to think about and vocalize all of the things you’re thankful for. As you go about your day, say one-sentence prayers thanking God for the weather or a friend or a cup of coffee. It’s difficult to lack joy when you’re constantly thinking about God’s good gifts.

Another way is to keep a “Gratitude Journal.” You can begin each day making a list (short or long) of things you are thankful for that day. This helps reorient your posture toward God, from seeing Him as distant or uninvolved, to seeing Him as a good Father who loves to bless His children.

And that gratitude can and should spill over to other people. It makes a difference to send a handwritten thank-you note to someone, or to send encouraging text messages to say “good job” or “I am thankful for you.” When you allow your gratitude to overflow and bless others, you find your heart more full of love and joy.

G. K. Chesterton said that one of the great benefits of believing in God is having someone to thank. C. S. Lewis wrote that praising something is the completion of one’s enjoyment of the gift. By progressively growing in gratitude, we will find ourselves growing in joy, and joy increases our thankfulness – it is a wonderful cycle of growth.

Prayer:

*Father, thank you for joy. Thank you for all of your wonderful gifts. I don't deserve any of them, but I accept them as signs of your great love. Teach me to live a life marked by gratitude, like Jesus. Amen.*

Reflection Questions:

How can you be more thankful? What do you thank God for today?

## DAY 4: JOY IS HUMILITY

“Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”

2 Corinthians 13:11 ESV

“Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what *you* said to *him*. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”

C. S. Lewis (*Mere Christianity*)

Joy comes from acknowledging the greatness of God and the smallness of yourself. Having a right understanding of who you are and who made you helps in two ways: First, you can delight in knowing that you matter, that the God who created the universe created you, on purpose, and He loves you. Second, you can delight in knowing that compared to Jesus, you are a pretty lousy person, desperately in need of saving, and fortunately, God loves to save!

Tim Keller says that pride is like a distended organ, something that is full of air to the point of pain. Only by emptying ourselves of the hot air of selfishness can we be properly filled with God’s love.

As Lewis explains above, humility isn’t about disliking yourself. A wise old professor at Asbury College used to remind his students that Jesus commands us to “love your neighbor as yourself.” So if we do a lousy job of loving ourselves, we probably do a lousy job of loving our neighbors. In humility, we can be thankful for ourselves without putting ourselves first.

As the expression goes, “humility isn’t thinking less of yourself; it’s thinking of yourself less.” When you are truly joyful person, you are so delighted in God, God’s people, and God’s creation, that you don’t need to think much about yourself.

Jesus said, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.” (Mark 9:35 ESV). The joyful servant puts others first and enjoys meeting others’ needs. Some people are naturally gifted at caring and service, and for others of us it takes effort. But in the end, if Jesus (Lord of the Universe) humbled Himself to serve, we can do likewise (Mark 10:45).

Because of the Fall, we are all born with a prideful bent. We want to make much of ourselves in different ways. But pride is exhausting. We were created “to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” (Westminster Shorter Catechism) Like a car driving on square tires or a fish swimming in pudding, when we try to do what we weren’t made for, life is a lot of work. But when we let go of our

desire for glory and enjoy God's glory, we find rest from the race and the joy of being what we should.

Prayer:

*Father, thank you for joy. Humble me – show me how little I deserve your love but how incredibly much I matter to you. Teach me to serve as Jesus served, and to delight in putting others first. Kill the pride that kills my joy. Amen.*

Reflection Questions:

What prideful things do you need to repent of? How can you serve someone today?

## DAY 5: JOY IS TRUST

“But I have trusted in your steadfast love;  
my heart shall rejoice in your salvation.  
I will sing to the LORD,  
because he has dealt bountifully with me.”

Psalm 13:5-6 ESV

“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”

1 Peter 1:8-9 ESV

Anxiety is a joy-killer. Fear is a good and normal emotion, but as Chip Dodd teaches in *Voice of the Heart*, the impairment of fear is anxiety, and the gift of fear is wisdom. Fear about the future should lead us to turn to Jesus and find our joy in Him. Joy in the midst of fear does not mean that God takes away our bad circumstances or magically alters our emotions; joy in the midst of fear means knowing in our hearts that we are not alone.

We can trust that God is with us in every moment, in every place, in every emotion, in every trial, in every celebration. Our good Father – who created us and is for our good – is within us and beside us and all around us. He is sovereign over the universe, and because of His goodness and power, we know that in the end, good will win and every one of His plans will come to pass.

We don't just trust God because He gave us a big book and told us we had to. We trust Him because of His *character*, because He has proven His great love for us beyond all doubt by sending His only Son to die for our sins. Because He delights in us, we can trust Him and have joy at all times.

Christian funerals are often surprisingly joyful events. There is sadness, yes, and often deep mourning. Weeping is the proper response to this unnatural event. But whenever Christians gather, we can be glad that God is with us in our sadness and that He understands. In the midst of the painful and unexplainable, we rejoice in the One we trust.

In our anger, sadness, guilt, and hurt, we can always have hope, because we are eternal creatures destined for never-ending glory in Christ. That changes everything in the universe, starting with our perspective. The key to finding joy in God can be summed up in this word: surrender. We can surrender to His will because He is our perfect Father.

So today, when you feel anxious or angry or hurt, try this: deliberately, out-loud (where possible), surrender that thing to God. Just say, “God, I submit this thing to your perfect will, and I trust

you, because you are powerful and wise and good.” If you keep this spirit of surrender long enough, you can’t help but experience greater joy.

Prayer:

*Father, thank you for joy. I trust you – help me to continue to grow in faith. You are powerful and good and you take care of your children. Nothing slips through your fingers or gets away from you. Because of that, I can joyfully rest in you no matter what. Amen.*

Reflection Questions:

What do you struggle to entrust to God? Why can you trust Him? Where has He come through for you in the past?

## DAY 6: JOY IS A GIFT

“His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’”

-Jesus (Matthew 25:23 ESV)

Joy is an experience that we enter into. Most people seek experiences to give them emotional reactions. That is not a bad thing – God gave us emotions as a gift, and He wants us to experience them. But joy, as we have explored this week, is much more than an emotion. Joy is an integral part of the Christian life, and there are ways to cultivate joy in our lives. Here are some ways we experience the gift of joy:

**Joy is a reward.** As the parable of the talents shows, joy is a gift that comes from obedience and investing in things that are godly. When we live sacrificially, we dive deeper into the places of God that are joyful. Worldliness might give us fleeting happiness, but only godliness leads to lasting joy.

**Joy is undeserved.** Even though we can do things that increase our joy, ultimately we recognize that none of us deserves joy. We all deserve wrath and condemnation, but God is merciful and graceful toward us. He gives joy to sinners as a sign of His love and generosity.

**Joy is an invitation.** C. S. Lewis said that he experienced moments of deep joy when he was an Atheist, and this led him to ask questions about Christianity – he wanted to know the source of those experiences. He knew that they were not of this world, and so He sought the otherworldly place from which they came. God was pursuing him, before Lewis loved God. And God pursued us when we were His enemies too.

**Joy is for all times.** Because joy empowers us through the full range of our emotions, we can obey the command to rejoice always. Always is a lot. Paul demonstrated what always looks like: he sang while he was in prison, rejoiced when he was beaten, and celebrated when he was threatened with death. If those are good occasions for rejoicing, surely many of the events of our lives are appropriate times as well.

But our perfect example, as always, is Jesus, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.” (Hebrews 12:2 ESV). For Jesus, His joy wasn’t to live a comfortable life and have a bunch of stuff. For Jesus, joy was found in doing the will of the Father – of living in determined pursuit of the one who loves Him best. Joy comes not from living the American dream – joy comes from obeying the Creator of the universe and being used for His great purposes.

**Joy is our destiny.** Joy is an experience of the supernatural – a place where the holy intersects with the natural. It is a chance for us to experience God’s grace and goodness and have a foretaste of things to come. In God’s eternal Kingdom, we will drink deeply from God’s eternal well of joy, forever and ever. We will be always satisfied yet always desiring more. We will be free from every earthly thing that has tried to steal our joy, and we will know the delight of our Savior

King's awesome presence. That is our destiny – perfect, unspoiled joy. Let's prepare our hearts for that day by learning to delight in and enjoy God today and every day.

Prayer:

*Father, thank you for joy. Thank you for the experiences of joy that invite me into your delight. May my delight in you continue to grow until you call me home to perfect eternal joy. Amen.*

Reflection Questions:

When have you experienced joy? What did that reveal about God the good Father?

## DAY 7: JOY AND THE STORY OF THE GOSPEL

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

-Jesus (John 3:16 ESV)

The word Gospel means “Good News” and that is exactly what it is. The Gospel is the story of God and man, and if it is true, it changes everything in the universe. (It is true.) It is the only foundation for real, lasting joy. Here’s why:

**God is the Author of the story.** “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1 ESV) This is the beginning of the Bible and the beginning of the Gospel. God made all things and delights in His creation as it delights in Him (Psalm 96:13). We can rejoice that He is good, eternal, unchanging, all-powerful, everywhere-present, all-knowing, and triune.

**God made us for Him.** God created humanity in His own image (Genesis 1:27). We were made for relationship with Him. John Piper paraphrases the Westminster Shorter Catechism when he says that “the chief end of man is to glorify God *by enjoying him forever.*” That is our purpose, and when we fill that purpose, we are naturally joyful.

Unfortunately, we do not naturally fulfill that purpose. Our ancestors Adam and Eve chose to rebel against God and try to sit on the throne of their own lives. Because of that, our hearts are bent toward evil and the Enemy Satan has been able to steal our joy.

**Jesus came to rescue us.** God had a plan to send His Son for us, right from the beginning (Genesis 3:15). Jesus is a person of the Trinity, eternal and uncreated. He was born of a virgin, fully God and fully man, to rescue and redeem us. In doing so, He shows us how to delight in God again. Jesus delighted to do the will of the Father. Hebrews 12:2 says of Jesus, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.”

Jesus lived a sinless life that we owe to God and died on the cross to rescue us from our sins. On the third day, He rose in victory over sin and death forever. Easter is the most joyful day of the year for a Christian, because Easter is the fulfillment of God’s great promises. After Jesus ascended, He sent His Holy Spirit to dwell in the hearts of His people and seal them as His own.

**We can be adopted into God’s family.** Because of what Jesus has accomplished, we can be transformed from traitors against God, deserving of His wrath, into sons and daughters, adopted and beloved. We experience His salvation by faith (Ephesians 2:8) – we cannot earn or deserve to be saved. We have nothing to offer God. But Jesus has accomplished it all for us. This is the most profound joy a human can know in this life.

**We will live with Him forever.** Our destiny is eternal joy in God’s Kingdom, where there is no death, mourning, crying, or pain (Revelation 21:4). Our relationship with our Creator will be completely healed and restored, and we will live in the redeemed creation in never-ending peace. This great hope enables us to have joy no matter how dark our circumstances, because we are confident that evil will not have the last word. God will win, because of Jesus’s victory.

**Prayer:**

*Father, thank you for the transforming joy of the Gospel. Thank you that you rescued me when I was lost, helpless, and undeserving. Thank you for the cross that won my salvation and the resurrection that proved your eternal victory over sin. You are my joy. Amen.*

**Reflection Questions:**

Have you surrendered to God's amazing grace, or are you trying to earn His love? Does the Gospel story fill you with joy?