

*When Yahweh brought back those who returned to Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with singing. Then they said among the nations, "Yahweh has done great things for them." Yahweh has done great things for us, and we are glad. Restore our fortunes again, Yahweh, like the streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears will reap in joy. He who goes out weeping, carrying seed for sowing, will certainly come again with joy, carrying his sheaves.*

*A cheerful heart makes good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones.*

With our theme for the day—and especially with our special guests—I wanted to talk a little bit about laughter and joy. We see it held up in little short verses and passages all over the Bible. We know it is a wonderful thing to laugh and to experience joy.

Since we are created in the image of God, then I have to assume that all our emotions are good—but certainly laughter and joy and happiness are wonderful places for our minds and hearts to go. One reason we are honoring our painted-up friends today is that they work to bring joy and laughter and happiness—especially to the young and the old—and those who need the healing that comes from laughing.

I read a couple of passages earlier. Psalm 126 is describing what it was like, emotionally, for those who returned from captivity in Babylon—the joy and laughter they experienced—the elation at being home and free. The Proverbs passage holds up cheerfulness—joy and a happy heart—as a medicine, as something that heals. Sometimes, it seems that laughter really may be the best medicine.

I again ask God's blessings on those of you have made it your life's work to bring a little happiness and joy into life.

We Americans spend a lot of our time and money in the pursuit of happiness. There are few countries in the world with more money to spend on things other than food, clothing, and shelter. Even Americans who consider themselves middle or low income have enough money to pay for a TV and a cable hookup. Most of us have enough money to buy more food than we need to be eating. I can prove that—as a country, we are the fattest we have ever been.

So, we take our extra money and we spend it seeking out happiness and joy. Problem is, too many Americans don't know where to look for either. We seek happiness in bigger boats and fancier cars and finer restaurants and fancier clothes and shinier motorcycles and more power and bigger houses. Notice one thing—I didn't say that any of these things are bad. They are not bad. It is just that we are wrong when we think they will bring us real joy.

Oh, we get a new car and it is SOOOO pretty and it is JUST the right color and JUST the right brand and plain old JUST RIGHT! We even go and sit in it and listen to the perfect sound on the stereo.

BUT! Sooner or later, that will all come to an end. It may be after we've had it back to the dealer 10 times for the same rattle or after we dent the fender backing into a tree or after the third or fourth big old door ding. Just like that pretty blue paint job, sooner or later the joy we feel over that car will come to a screeching halt. I predict it will be sooner than we think!

We build a new house that fills our every need and it feels SOOOO great to come home and sit back and breathe in and smell the new and we marvel at our insight at putting that closet right there and we love the way the carpet shows our barefoot prints when we walk across it. Then we go out and work in the yard, fertilizing and seeding and weeding and planting a hedge of red-tips and we come home every day and can't wait to see how our green thumb is working.

BUT! Sooner or later (and maybe sooner) we will go and sit in that chair and the new smell will be gone and might just be replaced with the smell of the septic tank backing up. The carpet will get matted or the closet rod will fall or the yard will get crabgrass and all the red-tips will get a fungus and die.

So—our houses need painting and our cars wear out and our clothes stretch out of shape and get stained. Seems that we are looking to things to give us happiness—when it is actually things and the pursuit of things that takes away our happiness, our joy. We get so busy trying to catch happiness that we lose our way and can't find it!

Think about the true joy in your life. Think of something that brings about a kind of sustained happiness. Chances are it is not a thing at all—it is a relationship. It is probably A loving relationship to your spouse or your children or your grandchildren or a wonderful boss or a long-time friend who knows everything about you and loves you anyway.

Did you ever do a study of the prophets? Do you remember how things were often good on the surface—that there was power and affluence and worship and many of the people were doing really good, thank you very much?

Yet, in their legalistic rebellion, they were seeking to relegate God into one area of their lives and to keep him from permeating their hearts and lives.

They sought to do what was needed, but keep the relationship to God on a business level—so that God only controlled their religious life and that was their only relationship to him. OF course this went back and forth until God had finally had enough and he allowed the people to be carried off and enslaved.

Keeping God at arm's length didn't work, did it? God wants all or nothing. We've very recently read some verses from Nehemiah—let me re-read them for you this morning:

*"Today is holy to Yahweh your God. Don't mourn, nor weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared, for today is holy to our Lord. Don't be grieved, for the joy of Yahweh is your strength."*

*11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Hold your peace, for the day is holy. Don't be grieved." Let me read Nehemiah 8:5-12.*

This is the circumstance we find described in the Psalm from earlier. Here the people who have returned—the remnant—are reminded that in relationship to God there is real joy.

If you are a Christian, you know that most real and most true and most satisfying and happiest and most joyful thing in the life of a human being is a relationship to God through Christ.

I love reading bumper stickers. They are often trite or even smug-sounding, but sometimes there is truth under all of that. That is the case with this bumper sticker—"k-n-o-w Jesus, k-n-o-w peace; n-o Jesus n-o peace." If you are a Christian, you know the peace that relationship brings—it is the peace that passes all understanding.

God has given us access to abounding joy through that relationship. That joy comes through the Holy Spirit—that part of God who lives in his children. Because we live in such a negative world, God has chosen to send us that comforter, that paraclete (which means one who comes along side). Making use of the power of the Holy Spirit brings liberty or freedom to have true joy.

Coming to God through Christ won't fix every problem in our lives, but that change of focus will certainly increase our understanding of our importance in the mind of God. The power and leadership of the Holy Spirit in us will also help us to move into real joy and real happiness. Through God we can have real freedom—freedom to experience happiness, joy, comfort, wisdom, strength, love, and hope.

II Corinthians 3:17 says, "Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." Real freedom comes from a relationship to God—made whole daily through the Spirit.

Strange that we are living in a time of great affluence and yet so many of us are unhappy. We live in a time of great personal freedom, and yet there is more bondage to addictions than at any time in history. Why is that? To a great extent, because we seek our happiness and joy in things—and not in relationships.

We especially need to understand that the ultimate relationship and the ultimate joy is to be found in the Lord's salvation. Relationship to God brings true freedom and true joy and that peace that passes all understanding. This relationship brings peace in the face of trials and danger it brings joy in the face of sadness.

If you are here today and you have never experienced that—I ask you, no I URGE you—please consider your life and your prospects for joy and peace in this world. Think back—no THING has ever made good on its promise. Do you want joy and peace and happiness? God is the source.

So, if only a true, vital relationship to God can bring REAL happiness and joy—then maybe we can see how our world is unhappy, why they have not found real joy—because they don't know the author of true happiness. They have yet to find God and to have that relationship.

But what happened to us Christians? What is our excuse? We have tasted pork chops and yet we choose to eat slop with the hogs. We have driven a Rolls and yet we are happy to be walking barefoot. We have been to the mansion yet we have reduced ourselves to living in a leaky tent.

Seems to me that we have lost our way. Maybe we've been brainwashed by the TV and the radio and the billboards and the movies. Even though we should know better, we have fallen into the trap and we are seeking joy in things. Even though we know better, we have become the same as the world.

Fortunately, there is another Psalm that makes it clear what we are to do: From Psalm 51: Verses 1-2; 7-12:

*Purify me with hyssop, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. 8 Let me hear joy and gladness, That the bones which you have broken may rejoice. 9 Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all of my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me. 11 Don't throw me from your presence, and don't take your holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Uphold me with a willing spirit.*

This may be a song—but it works as a simple prayer of confession and restoration.

Christians, if we are not full of liberty to experience true happiness and real joy, the first thing we need to do is confess to God—along with our other sins, it is the sin of seeking out other Gods in our lives, seeking happiness in things, that has stolen our joy.

So first things first—we need to confess and call upon God to have mercy and give grace. Then we need to grow in that restoration. To be transformed by it. The last part of that passage says we then need to show the fruit of that transformation to others—in the joy we spread and the God we serve and the happiness God grants.

Where do you stand? Do you need to find that relationship or restore it? Do you need to come and cast out your anchor here, working and living and loving—finding joy in a relationship here in this place? Whatever it is—some time during the invitation, come forward and talk to God about it.