

# “Singing for Joy!”

Psalm 98:1-8 & Isaiah 55:11-13

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The psalmist proclaims, Psalm 98:4 “Shout for joy! Burst into jubilant song!” If you do not feel joyful then you are in a similar place to the psalmist and the first people who heard this call to joy during worship.

This psalm was a response to the crisis of exile. Joyful praise was to be the response of those who lost their homes and jobs. A jubilant song was to be sung by those who were dragged away from the homeland, separated from their family and forced into slavery.

Why should we be joyful in the midst of crisis? How can we be jubilant when we don’t feel like celebrating?

Pastor John Ortberg answers these questions with an illustration. Imagine you have a 5-year-old child whom you love with all your heart. The child becomes very ill so much so that you are afraid and miserable over the impending death of your child. However, the doctor tells you that there is a simple, low risk operation that will completely heal your child. Your child will be fine. Your joy knows no limits.

The problem is your 5 year old child does not understand. Upon learning of the operation, your child is scared and frightened of the doctor. Your child does not know, what you know, that all will be well. Your reassurance doesn’t help. Your child just doesn’t understand. Being joyful in your child’s presence makes your child think you’re not taking them seriously and that you don’t care. So, you meet your child where they are at, you conceal your joy as Jesus did as you demonstrate your great compassion and steadfast love. Every so often you step out of the room, so you can dance with joy and burst into jubilant song, because you know all will be well.

The psalmist is trying to help us understand that we are like the sick child that will ultimately be healed. Like the parent in the illustration, the psalmist is speaking to the whole human race, that is weighed down with troubles, however the psalmist knows that in the long run all will be well.

Scripture proclaims the healing of our heavenly doctor in Revelation. Revelation 21:4 “God will wipe every tear from their eyes and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things will be gone forever.”

Jesus knew this. G. K. Chesterton suggests this is why Jesus went off to pray, so Jesus could step out of the room of our sickness to dance with joy and burst into jubilant song with God for Jesus knew all will be well.

Chesterton writes, “Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian. Jesus restrained something. I say it with reverence. There was something that Jesus hid from all people when he went up a mountain to pray. There was something that Jesus covered constantly. Something that was too great for God to show us when Jesus walked upon our earth; and I have fancied that it was God’s mirth.” Mirth is defined as glee, fun, cheerfulness accompanied with joyous laughter.

Jesus tried to ease our fears, to assure us that all will be well in numerous ways, but we don’t understand. If Jesus would have always been joyfully dancing and jubilantly singing, the disciples would have thought that he was a lunatic, totally out of touch with them. Therefore, Jesus concealed most of his joy.

Perhaps, Moses was able to perceive God’s joy better than most of us. Perhaps, that is why Moses shined after his time with God on the mountain. Perhaps, it was God’s joy that enable him to lead the Israelites as he endured 40 years of their bitter complaints. Moses had glimpsed the joy of God in the ultimate, eternal promise land.

The psalmist begins by encouraging us to remember times of joy such as the Israelites deliverance from slavery. We are to remember our experiences of God’s steadfast love. We are to remember the marvelous things God had done for us.

Joy was at the beginning. Joy is challenged in the middle. And joy will be restored at the end and celebrated for eternity. The hunger for joy is so persistent that it at least suggests that joy is more lasting than our troubles, that joy is connected to the great secret God has imbedded in the universe. Pastor Ortberg wrote, “I believe because the hunger for joy will not go away. It would be an odd world if creatures had thirst but there

was no such thing as water or appetite but there was no such thing as food. I believe because if what Jesus taught is true, then joy is at the core of the universe.”

Jesus said, John 15:11 “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” Jesus said this as he was about to ensure that we all will experience healing joy by his conquering of all that robs us of joy upon the cross. Jesus spoke of joy at the end of his ministry. All his healings, teachings and love point to joy.

For a brief moment the disciples and a crowd of people caught a glimpse of Jesus’ healing joy on Palm Sunday as they sang. Luke 19:38 “All is well in heaven! Glory in the high places!” Sadly, many were still unable to grasp joy and told Jesus to silence the crowd. Luke 19:40 “Jesus replied, ‘If they kept quiet, the stones would do it for them, shouting praise.’” It seems that when we are joyless, we are denser than stones.

Jesus’ life and ministry paint a picture of God and God’s kingdom so vibrant with joy that we can hardly even hope it will be true. It produces a sliver of what happened to the disciples after the resurrection, when we are told, Luke 24:41 “they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement”.

Frederick Buechner wrote, “Joy is home. God created us in joy and created us for joy, and in the long run not all the darkness there is in the world and in ourselves can separate us from that joy, because whatever else it means to say that God created us in God’s image, I think it means that even when we cannot believe in God, even when we feel most spiritually bankrupt and deserted by God, God’s mark is deep within us. We have God’s joy in our blood.”

Perhaps it was joy that enabled Mother Teresa to serve all those suffering children. She knew that all of them would one day be healed with joy. Perhaps, it was joy that kept her going despite her own personal spiritual struggles and doubts. Mother Teresa said, “Every time you smile at someone, it is an action of love, a gift to that person a beautiful thing.” Joy shines forth from us and lifts those around us up whenever we smile.

The psalmist is not asking us to sing a song of happiness dependent on our circumstances, rather to sing a song of joy that radiates from God regardless of our circumstances.

Psalm 98 is a swelling expansion of joyful worship. It begins in our individual hearts and is joined by the community and is joined by all people and is ultimately even joined by all of creation. This was Israel’s calling to bless all people with God’s joy, just as it is our calling today. There is to be no limits to God’s joy. We are to sing a new song for God’s joy is always expanding, healing, and including more and more people.

The swelling of joy is documented in the book of Acts. It is a new song reaching people who were thought to be beyond the reach of God’s joy. Joy is for Cornelius, a Roman centurion. Joy is for people who eat unclean food. Joy is for those who are not circumcised. Joy is to be extended to all.

As Peter was proclaiming the gospel, the good news of God’s swelling joy, for all people, the Holy Spirit filled them, even the outcast Gentiles. They were filled with joy, sang a new song and danced in jubilation. C. S. Lewis in Narnia depicts the Holy Spirit as God’s breath that melts the ice of our painful circumstances, sin and the forces of evil that freeze us into fearful paralysis. The Holy Spirit warms us, sets us free from our icy prison and empowers us to serve with joy.

This is why we are to shout for joy and burst into jubilant song. No matter how bad things might currently be today God’s healing joy will transform us and everyone. Ultimately every tear will be wiped away. God’s joy will wash away death, sorrow, every form of pain and every joyless feeling, forever.

In Narnia C. S. Lewis depicts our life today like an endless brutal, cold, Minnesota, winter. The winter is so long that all that is left of spring and summer are the stories that have been passed down through the generations. They hope in God as they try to imagine the prophesized joy of spring. In Narnia no one knows what it is like to feel the warm summer sun on their skin. They know only the icy sting of winter. No one has ever seen green grass or the pallet of vibrant colors of the spring landscape. They only know the drab white of snow and the dormant browns of the trees. No one has ever smelled a flower. No one has ever seen a blossom. No one has ever heard the spring chorus of birds or the soothing babble of a brook. No one has ever swum in a lake. No one has ever tasted spring fruit or summer vegetables. In Narnia each new day is a different experience of winter as they hunger for the spring they have never personally experienced.

We are like the creatures of Narnia we have heard the story of Eden-- a joyful garden paradise with intimate fellowship with God. We hope in God as we try to imagine the prophesized establishment of the kingdom of God on earth and the joy of heaven. We have experienced snippets of joy but mainly we just know

the longing, the hunger for joy. Most of us know we are sick yet few of us are certain of how we will be healed with God's joy for eternity.

In Narnia Jesus is portrayed by Aslan. When Aslan rose from the dead the ice began to melt, flowers bloomed, grass glowed green, fruit trees blossomed, music filled the cold silence, spring fragrance danced in the air, coats were shed. It is a poetic description of the joy that will fill us.

The prophet Isaiah proclaims **Isaiah 55:11-13** **"Says the Lord. 'My ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. You will live in joy and peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song, and the trees of the field will clap their hands! Where once there were thistles, giant sequoias will grow. Where thorn bushes grew, stately pines will sprout up'."**

I hope all of us can imagine some of the future joy that awaits us all, enabling us to find our voice in jubilant praise. You are invited to get swept up in the ever-expanding harmony of God's healing joy.

The psalmist sings, **Psalm 98:1-8** **"Sing a new song to the LORD! God has worked miracles, and with God's own powerful arm, God has won the victory. The LORD has shown the nations that God has the power to save and to bring justice. God has been faithful in God's love for Israel, and God's saving power is seen everywhere on earth. Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; Sing your praise to the Lord with the harp, with the trumpets, with the horn. Make a melodious song. Make a joyful symphony before the Lord, the King! Let the sea and everything in it shout God's praise! Let the earth and all living things join in. Let the rivers clap their hands in glee! Let the hills sing out their songs of joy before the Lord. God will straighten out the whole world, God will put the world right, and everyone in it."** Amen