

# Finding Joy

Isaiah 61:1-4 and 8-11, Luke 1: selected verses, Psalm 126:1-3, John 15:11, Psalm 90:17

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**Prayer for Understanding** Holy God, Word made flesh, let us come to this word open to being surprised. Silence our agendas; banish our assumptions; cast out our casual detachment. Confound our expectations; clear the cobwebs from our ears; penetrate the corners of our hearts with your word. We know that you can, we pray that you will, and we wait with great anticipation. Amen.

How does one live a joyful life? Jesus continually brings joy into our life. Jesus said, “I came **John 15:11 ...so that God’s joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.**” The angel proclaimed, **Luke 2:10 “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born!”** God is joy. God created the cosmos out of joy. God created humanity in God’s image, joyful, so we can play together for eternity.

Life is hard strewn with joy robbers. I have been striving to live joyfully for decades. I conclude most of my emails and letters with the word “joy”. Joy is my prayer for everyone. Joy is a way of life that I cultivate.

The psalmist sings, **Psalm 90:17 “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us.”** Joy flows from celebrating that you are favored by God. God loves you. You are God’s cherished masterpiece. God’s grace is constantly perfecting you and making you glorious.

On November 10, when my surgeon entered the preop room and asked how I was doing, my reply was: “I am joyful for the grand adventures my hip enabled me to enjoy and I am looking forward to my new hip enabling me to once again enjoy grand adventures.” It was an answer that I intentionally formulated as I prepared for the surgery hoping to sustain joy. Often joy is sustained by celebrating God’s blessings in the past and looking forward to God’s blessings in the future.

The psalmist sings of God’s past blessings. **Psalm 126:1-3 NLT “When the Lord brought back the exiles to Jerusalem, it was like a dream! We were filled with laughter, and we sang for joy. And the other nations said, “What amazing things the Lord has done for them.” Yes, the Lord has done amazing things for us! What joy!”** Imagine their joy. They were forced from their homes into slavery. They were separated from family and friends. They spent 100 years in agonizing exile. Finally, they are home, reunited with family and friends. They are free. They laugh, celebrate, and rejoice. Joy flows from celebrating the joy of the past and imagining the joy God promises us in the future.

The Bible is permeated with joy which comes from believing the promises of God. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, **Isaiah 61:1-4 and 8-11 NLT “The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, for the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to proclaim that captives will be released, and prisoners will be freed. God has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord’s favor has come, and with it, the day of God’s anger against their enemies. To all who mourn in Israel, God will give a crown of beauty for ashes, a joyous blessing instead of mourning, festive praise instead of despair. In their righteousness, they will be like great oaks that the Lord has planted for God’s own glory. They will rebuild the ancient ruins, repairing cities destroyed long ago. They will revive them, though they have been deserted for many generations. For I, the Lord, love justice. I hate robbery and wrongdoing. I will faithfully reward my people for their suffering and make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants will be recognized and honored among the nations. Everyone will realize that they are a people the Lord has blessed.”** I am overwhelmed with joy in the Lord my God! For God has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness. I am like a bridegroom dressed for his wedding or a bride with her jewels. The Sovereign Lord will show God’s justice to the nations of the world. Everyone will praise God! God’s righteousness will be like a garden in early spring, with plants springing up everywhere.”

Zechariah was a joyful priest daily leading prayers of thanks for past joys and teaching about future joys. One day when Zechariah was praying, he sensed God saying to him. **Luke 1:13-14 NLT “Your wife Elizabeth will give you a son! And you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness and many will rejoice with you”** for John will prepare people for Jesus’ redeeming, joyful, love.

When Mary went to visit her relative Elizabeth as soon as they hugged, her baby, John the Baptist, jumped for joy. Elizabeth rejoiced and exclaimed to Mary, **Luke 1:45 NLT “You are blessed, because you believed that the Lord would do what God said.”** Mary then burst into song, “How I rejoice in God my Savior!”

Imagine you are Mary. Your current situation is bleak, chaotic, and stressful. Your body is aching everywhere. You are pregnant with morning sickness. There are no convenience foods or restaurants to fulfill your cravings. You are fighting with your fiancé, Joseph, who is very skeptical about your virgin conception story. He is planning to break off the engagement. Your family and friends will have nothing to do with you because your unwed pregnancy is disgracing the family. You keep sharing the vision you have received from God, but most people respond in disbelief. No one wants to risk being seen with you for you may be surrounded and stoned to death for your unwed pregnancy at any moment. Alone, frustrated, and afraid you set off on foot to visit your relative Elizabeth a 60-mile journey which will take days. You arrive at Elizabeth's home exhausted, dirty, and starving. Your swollen feet are cracked and throbbing, your back is riddled with painful knots. Your first words are not give me some food, a basin to soak my feet and a back massage. Your first words from your dry throat are a joyful song. "Oh, how I praise the Lord. How I rejoice in God my Savior!"

Why is Mary so joyful? Her current circumstances are dismal. Her immediate future is bleak and uncertain. God's message to her was sparse with no clear direction regarding what to do next. God said, **Luke 1:28 "Greetings favored woman! The Lord is with you!"** We all have heard God say the same promise to each of us over and over. All of us are favored for we are God's beloved children. Today after the birth, life, and resurrection of Jesus, and Jesus' explanation of how the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts, it is much easier to perceive God with us than in Mary's day when God was believed to be present only in the temple in the Holy of holies. God's presence was thought to be only dispersed through the priests, then through men and only a little, if any, of God's presence could be felt by a young woman. The reality that Mary was favored and God was with her was a radical departure from everything she had been taught and lived, yet she joyfully believed it.

Luke wrote, **Luke 1:29-33, 35 "Mary confused and disturbed, tried to think what the angel could mean. "Don't be afraid, Mary," the angel told her, "for you have found favor with God! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. And he will reign over Israel forever; his kingdom will never end! The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby to be born will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God... For nothing is impossible with God."**

That's it, that's all God said to Mary. No specifics about Jesus' life, her future, or how God is going to fulfill God's promises. Mary knew of God's promises, mighty works, and deliverance through the Old Testament. Mary's joy flowed from her giving thanks for past joys and believing that God will give us abundant future joys.

Mary sang, **Luke 1:46-55 "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For God took notice of God's lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, and God has done great things for me. God shows mercy from generation to generation to all who revere God. God's mighty arm has done tremendous things! God has scattered the proud and haughty ones. God has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. God has helped God's servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. For God made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham, Sarah and their children forever."**

Kari Myers writes, "How foolish to think that the joy of Christmas is found only when every last thing meets our grand expectations. If that were the criteria, then the first Christmas surely would have been considered a disaster. Mary probably had not planned on going into labor during her trip to Bethlehem. Far from the comfort of her home, she no doubt was distraught to learn there was no room for them in the inn. Delivering her precious baby in a smelly stable and laying him in an animal's feeding trough was certainly not the way in which the Son of God should enter the world. Or was it? The joy of Christmas is not found in buying the perfect gift or preparing the perfect meal. It is found in receiving the perfect gift of Immanuel — God with us." It is joyfully, believing that no matter how your plans turn out or your circumstances that God is fulfilling God's promises. It is joyfully believing that you are favored, that God is with you and calling you to help in doing some of God's redemptive work."

Despite joyfully going into surgery with joy for past grand adventures and looking forward to future adventures, I was not joyful the first week after surgery. I was in pain, uncomfortable, emotional and the P.T. was arduous. Food tasted off. My digestive system was unhappy. I was unable to sleep through the night. My thinking was foggy. Recovery seemed slow. I missed being able to talk to my parents. I became depressed.

The psalmist was in a similar state of being. Despite being joyful for past joys and looking forward to future joys the psalmist was struggling. The psalmist sang, **Psalms 126 :4-6 NLT "Restore our fortunes, Lord, as streams renew the desert. Those who plant in tears will harvest with shouts of joy. They weep as they go to plant their seed, but they sing as they return with the harvest."** Perhaps you will find joy by joining the psalmist in this threefold prayer. Lord restore us like a barren desert that is nourished with streams. Lord restore us by helping us grieve, transforming our sorrow into joy. Lord restore us by encouraging us to plant goodness and harvest joy.

There is an ebb and flow to life. We endure dry times and rejoice in times abundant with living water. God will restore us. Jesus explained that we experience renewal when we learn the unforced rhythms of grace. On one hand, God will fill us with joy. On the other hand, we are responsible to find joy. We are to plant joy. Make an investment in our joy. Thankfully during that tough week Leslie, Spencer, Abigail, and friends encouraged me. I read cards, texts, and emails from you. I intentionally planted that which yields joy in my life. I looked at family pictures, read Backpacker magazine, enjoyed ice cream and popcorn. I watched sunsets. I napped. I grieved the death of my parents. I am thankful for joys we shared. I look forward to the joy we will share in heaven. I thought about specific things I can do to honor them and perpetuate their legacy. I planted some of the great gifts they shared with me. I imagined how my planting, serving, loving will bring joy to others and myself.

The psalmist explains that during difficult times we plant with tears. It is helpful to name our losses and to grieve them. Our planting and grieving will yield joyful fruit, yet we need to get out there and harvest the fruit, share, and celebrate.

This Christmas season find joy by being joyful for the joy of past Christmases and look forward to the joy of future Christmases. On your blue days, remind yourself that God will renew your joy. And plant by doing your favorite things, with your favorite people. And grieve your losses. And when anything good happens celebrate. On your blue days, start a new tradition that will yield joy in the future.

God is inviting everyone to join Mary in joyfully singing, **“I'm bursting with God-news; I'm dancing the song of my Savior God.”** Amen