

# The Joy of Loving

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:23-32, Romans 7: Select Verses

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*Pastor James York*

A fable tells of how, once upon a time, there was a piece of iron that was very strong. One after another, the axe, the saw, the hammer, and the flame tried to mold it. "I'll master it," said the axe. Its blows fell heavily on the iron, but every blow made its edge blunter, until it ceased to strike. "Leave it to me," said the saw, and it worked backwards and forwards on the iron's surface until its jagged teeth were all worn and broken. Then it fell aside. "Ah!" said the hammer. "I knew you wouldn't succeed. I'll show you the way." But at the first blow, off flew its head and the iron remained as before. "Shall I try?" asked the small, soft flame. "Forget it," all replied. "What can you do?" But the flame curled around the iron, embraced it, and never left it until the iron melted under the flame's irresistible influence. Such is the power of God's all-encompassing love that leads us through suffering, heals us, transforms us and sustains us on our journey with joy until our joy is made complete.

If you had to make big changes in your life today in order to avoid death tomorrow, could you do it? Statistics say there's a 9 to 1 probability that you can't change.

Researchers have examined patients who were told to change for their health. Many make some initial changes however after two years only 10 percent made the changes necessary to improve their health. Companies spend millions of dollars on consultants each year to improve their work environment, service and products. Most recommendations are rejected immediately; a few are short lived; only 10% actually happen. Many a company has gone bankrupt because they refused to adapt to a changing world.

Life in a fallen world results in all of us developing a serious heart defect. This defect limits our ability to love, hope, be at peace and be joyful. This defect hinders our ability to serve, give, praise and worship. God desires for us wholeness, love and joy. God tried all sorts of remedies to heal us. God tried giving us a time out by sending us out of the Garden of Eden. God tried making us earn our way by making us have to work for our food, clothing and shelter. God tried starting over through the flood. God tried discipline, punishing us for our sins. God tried making a covenant with us giving us ten clear, simple commandments that would heal us and enable us to love God and neighbor. God tried encouraging us, later warning us, through the prophets. All of these remedies failed. Like the axe, saw and hammer none of them could heal our iron hard cold hearts.

God always steadfast in love with us had another remedy, a new covenant, a life altering, and lifesaving heart surgery. A new covenant that is bringing health, wholeness, salvation, peace, love and joy into our lives.

The prophet Jeremiah proclaims. **Jeremiah 31:31-34** “The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt-- a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the LORD," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”

God’s love is a constant embracing flame melting the ice of our soul, warming our heart, enabling us to love and be joyful. As sure as your heart beats, God is loving you. As sure as you draw in breath, the Holy Spirit is filling you with peace and joy. This is the new covenant of God’s forgiving love that is healing you and connecting your soul to God and others with joyful love.

In the twelfth century Guigo the Carthusian describes the new covenant through a poem entitled “Whole Life from a Grape, a Well, a Spark and a Seed”

Lord, how much juice you can squeeze from a single grape.  
How much water you can draw from a single well.  
How great a fire you can kindle from a tiny spark.  
How great a tree you can grow from a tiny seed.  
My soul is so dry that by itself it cannot pray;  
Yet you can squeeze from it the juice of a thousand prayers.  
My soul is so parched that by itself it cannot love;  
Yet you can draw from it boundless love for you and for my neighbor.  
My soul is so cold that by itself it has no joy;  
Yet you can light the fire of heavenly joy within me.  
My soul is so feeble that by itself it has no faith;  
Yet by your power my faith grows to a great height.  
Thank you for prayer, for love, for joy, for faith;  
Let me always be prayerful, faithful, loving, and joyful.

God’s new covenant enables us to reframe our thinking, experience God’s forgiveness, sense the flame of God’s love and the peaceful, joyful air of the Holy Spirit. The new covenant is the remedy for our heart defects. Unfortunately, often we try to heal ourselves by just our thinking, by rules or by disciplining ourselves. The Apostle Paul

lamented the futility of this approach. **Romans 7: Select Phrases “I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.”**

Most often what holds us back from being joyful, peaceful and loving, from making good, positive and healing changes in our lives is that we view change as something we do — an activity or habit that must be altered. We tend to approach change with facts, analysis and information. Thinking is just a small part of the transformation.

What we're missing, says John Kotter, a Harvard Business School professor and expert on organizational change, is the heart. “Behavior change happens mostly by speaking to people's feelings. In highly successful change efforts, people find ways to help others see the problems or solutions in ways that influence emotions, not just thought.”

Dr. Dean Ornish, founder of the Preventative Medicine Research Institute in California, agrees. Rather than tell a patient to change or die — the conventional approach — he focuses on helping them tap into their emotions for joy is a more powerful motivator than fear.

Change happens when we nurture joyful loving relationships. What these change experts have discovered is something that God is already doing through the new covenant. If you really want to change people's behavior, you need to give them a story, an identity, a relationship that is “emotionally resonant.” The prophet Jeremiah explains how God is working to transform us, humanity notoriously resistant to change, by offering us not another set of rules, but a relationship. We have a long history of being frozen, trying to preserve ourselves by having an iron clad heart. Often we are absurdly stubborn as we resist even the best of changes. After God delivered the Israelites from slavery they fought the wonderful change of life into freedom and wanted to go back to slavery. God's grace forgives us, sets us free from sin and gives us power to choose yet we choose to go back to sin. So God takes the initiative to transform us. The old covenant, the one written on tablets of stone, was, in effect, a thinking approach to change — facts, information, commandments. That covenant was broken because the people couldn't adapt themselves to it fully, couldn't conform. Like an addict who tries hard to bolster the willpower to change, the people of God were powerless to make those difficult lifestyle changes on their own.

So God turns to another approach. Rather than write another legal prescription or warn us of impending doom, God is putting a new covenant in our hearts, in our emotions, in our hopes and dreams. God has moved from commandments to conversation, from rules to relationship. No longer would we simply know about God as

an external agent who heals us by calling for our obedience. Rather we will personally experience God and God's forgiving grace and God's love, peace and joy.

Jesus embodies this new covenant. While the religious leaders and others around him continually pressed in wanting to live by and for the rules, Jesus was constantly calling people to engage God through a relationship rather than through religious ritual. Jesus invited people to know God, to experience God, to savor peace and joy, to let go of burdens and sins and receive grace and forgiveness. He wants us to love God, to love all people, to love yourself and to follow a new path of service. Loving with all your mind, strength, soul and heart is the way to glorious wholeness. Jesus painted a picture of a future filled with joyful abundant life for those who would be transformed in this way.

Jesus said, **John 12:23-32 "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor. "Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say-- 'Father, save me from this hour'? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name." Then a voice came from heaven, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again." The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, "An angel has spoken to him." Jesus answered, "This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."**

Unless a grain of wheat dies it cannot change, be transformed and grow. Barbara Brown Taylor said, "If you encase a seed in plastic and hang it around your neck, it will never be good for anything but a trinket. What Jesus is telling us is that if we do everything in our power to protect our lives the way they are—if we successfully prevent change, prevent conflict, prevent pain—then at the end we will find that we have no life at all. But if we hate...all the ways we cheapen our lives by chasing comfort, safety, and superiority in this world—if we hate that enough to stop it and start chasing God instead—then there will be no end to the abundance of our lives."

C.S. Lewis came to terms with the reality that his protected life in academia had kept him safe, but it had not given him joy. Lewis loved a woman who was dying of cancer. Only by risking opening himself to the immense sadness of loss, death and grieving, the risk of deeply loving, did he finally discover deep and lasting joy.

Preoccupation with self-stifles joy and love. Anything given halfheartedly is not a joy rather a chore. Joy flourishes from loving relationships. Joy flourishes from giving yourself away for God and others, for that which is bigger than you. Joy flourishes from glorifying God. When we give ourselves away in love that is when we truly live, that is when we are filled with glory and joy.

In order for us to discover the joy of loving we need to be transformed. The transformation begins when we let go, when we allow that which hinders our love and joy to die. This results in the ice in our soul melting. This results in letting our iron hard heart yield to the molding love of God.

Jesus compared his death on the cross to a seed being buried in the ground. Jesus took all that destroys love, peace and joy and buried it in the ground at the foot of the cross so that love, peace and joy can flourish. The result is much fruit; the seed which was alone is surrounded by seeds.

Jesus ended his teaching saying, "I will draw all people to myself". Jesus came to unite us all in the joy of loving God and loving each other like a cluster of seeds, a bunch of grapes. Jesus came not to condemn the world but rather to save the world. Jesus came to make our hearts whole. Jesus came to help us change, to let go, to let die all that hinders our love, so we can be transformed, filled with the peaceful air of the Holy Spirit, molded by the love of God and filled with the joy of abundant life by our relationship with Jesus. Jesus came to show us the joy of loving. Amen.