

Week 2 - Cultivate Joy - Habakkuk 3:17-19 (page 787)

Scripture Reading: Psalm 16:1-11

Introduction

This morning we come to the second sermon of our series on thanksgiving living

Last week we looked at the necessity of cultivating gratitude and how we can increase our gratitude

We saw how proper understanding of who God is and our relationship to God and the gifts that he gives us leads us to being grateful to him for those gifts

Gratitude is foundational to thanksgiving because it is the heart attitude and understanding that must be present to cause one to give thanks

Today we are going to turn to our second foundational aspect of thanksgiving living - joy

Joy is also mentioned many times in the Bible

We find the word "joy" in our ESV Bible 179 times in both the Old and New Testaments

In past sermons we have seen that joy is the state of great or intense gladness that is often characterized by verbal expression and appropriate movement of the body - it's where the expressions "jump for joy" comes from

That reminds me of the old Chinese proverb: "He who puts his dish soap on a high shelf must jump for Joy"

But whether you jump for joy or merely pump your fist in exultation, it is common for the physical expression of joy to be accompanied by a verbal expression as well

Take **Psalm 28:7** as an example from Scripture - there we read:

The LORD is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song I give thanks to him.

Sadly, studies show that while increasing somewhat from the low reported in 2020, joy is in short supply these days

That's largely because we, as a rule, tend to attach joy to our circumstances and, when things aren't going as we would like, we lack joy

And that brings us to our key passage this morning from the book of Habakkuk

Habakkuk is one of the Minor Prophets and he prophesied during the reign of Manasseh who was king of the southern kingdom of Judah

We read about Manasseh and the nature of his reign in 2Kings 21:1-5 and we see that he began to reign when he was 12-years old and he reigned for 55 years before reading [**2Ki 21:2**] "*what he did was evil in the sight of the Lord*"

Not only did Manasseh sin on a personal level, he led Judah to also forsake the Lord and to worship idols

To put it mildly, things were far from rosy during the time of Habakkuk and he also knew that God would not be patient forever and God's judgment was sure to fall on Judah

And he knew that when the judgment came things were going to be even worse

That's the situation as we come to our passage in **Habakkuk 3:17-19** where Habakkuk speaks of joy in spite of circumstances:

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places.

If we are going to experience joy, the first thing we need to determine is what joy is

I. What is biblical joy?

It's rather unfortunate but we in the church have adopted a wrong idea when it comes to joy

And it should come as no surprise because countless sermons, books, and articles have told us the idea that joy and happiness are completely different things and that is not exactly the case

It might well surprise some of you to hear me say such a thing so let me explain what I mean

While it's true that "joy" and "happiness" are not *precise* synonyms to one another and there are subtle differences between them, they are very closely related and godly, well-meaning people have made them seem more different than they truly are

In truth, the two words are so closely related to one another that they are often used synonymously in common speech

Let's look quickly at the dictionary definitions of both words

"Happiness" is defined as: "an agreeable feeling or condition of the soul arising from good fortune or propitious happening of any kind; the possession of those circumstances or that state of being which is attended with enjoyment"

"Joy" is defined as: "the passion or emotion excited by the acquisition or expectation of good pleasurable feelings caused by success, good fortune, and the like, or by a rational prospect of possessing that which we love or desire"

The main difference that I see in those two definitions is that happiness is based on the *possession* of propitious circumstances and joy can be experienced if the possession of such circumstances is possessed or only *expected*

It has been said that happiness has to do with what *happens* to us making it temporary and possibly fleeting

When good things happen, we feel happy, but as soon as the good thing goes away or is replaced by something less good, our happiness leaves us

My youngest daughter was that way when she was a little girl

She could have had the most amazing day and been ecstatically happy only to have something make it the worst day ever

And, if that is how you view happiness, with joy being a deeper, more permanent feeling, I guess happiness and joy would be quite different things to you

And I would have to agree that joy and happiness aren't precisely the same but I believe that in Scripture they are close enough that we can determine that there is more distinction than difference between the two terms

Then again, some people actually believe that the pursuit of joy is holy while the pursuit of happiness is secular

And they feel a kind of moral superiority in being above the carnal pursuit of happiness because seeking to be happy is somehow wrong

What are we to do then with the final recorded words of Moses that we find in **Deuteronomy 33:29**?

Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the LORD, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph!

We also are saved by the Lord and that fact alone should make us ecstatically happy

And what about the fact that God made allowance in his Law for a man who was newly married [**Deuteronomy 24:5**] to "not go out with the army or be liable for any other public duty" for a year so that he might "be happy" with his wife?

God is not against feelings of happiness and the old saying; "God wants you to be holy not happy" is nonsense

God wants you to be both holy and happy

We have a wrong view of happiness when we think that the state of being happy means we never suffer

The life of a follower of Christ will have times of suffering and we will experience true sorrow

But God hasn't called us to a life of stoic, cheerless life of endurance looking only to joy in the future

When we have the assurance of God's love, provision, protection, and presence even during our darkest times we can experience joy and we should exhibit more happiness in spite of our circumstances

As Charles Spurgeon once said - "There will be three effects of nearness to Jesus: humility, happiness, and holiness"

I defy you to find someone who has joy who is not also expressing at least some amount of happiness - you cannot truly be joyful and glum at the same time

Here's another quick but important thought

Consider what would happen if as our world preaches how to be happy, we tell people that being a follower of Christ won't make you happy but they can be joyful in their misery [joy]

I doubt that would be very attractive to most unbelievers

The distinction we are looking for is in the source of both joy and happiness because both can be found just as readily in all manner of pursuits even if they aren't God-honoring

Consider the addict who is seeking their next fix

In spite of the fact that their habit is ultimately bad for them, they are fixated on serving their appetite for more and experience elation as they truly enjoy the feeling they get from their score

What we should focus on is where one finds true joy *and* happiness that lasts

II. Where is biblical joy found?

Verse 18 tells us where we can find true joy [**Habakkuk 3:18**] - Habakkuk writes about horrible circumstances then says:

I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation

How different his perspective is from that of most people

When we don't have what we want or when we face difficulty our first response is seldom joy

Our perspective is severely limited and our focus is quite narrow and when we don't have what we think we should or when we don't feel we're being treated as we should our natural inclination is to get angry, to grumble and complain

But not Habakkuk

He knows that God's sovereign control isn't diminished or his power weakened by our circumstances

Neither has God's love toward us gone cold when he sends or permits difficulty or deprivation into our lives

Romans 8:28 hasn't been repealed and God is still working all things together for good for those who are called according to his purpose

Joy is relational and biblical joy comes from our relationship with the Lord

Look with me at **Philippians 4:4** where Paul writes: *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice*

I'm sure we can all agree that rejoicing is simply the outward manifestation of having joy -

Even if we occasionally have to work at rejoicing, it would be impossible to rejoice without joy being present

And when we are filled with joy, our joy will overflow with rejoicing

And, once again, God should be the source of our joy as we read in **Psalms 16:11** where the psalmist writes:

In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forever.

The character and presence of God is the ultimate source of true, lasting, biblical joy and we should rejoice in all that God has revealed about himself

Psalm 37:4 tells us:

Delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart

That sounds like the definition of joy and happiness to me

But let's look at what else the Bible reveals about where we can find joy

First of all, we find joy when we come to know Christ as our Savior and Lord because when we trust Christ, God fills us with "all joy"

We see this in **Romans 15:13**

Jesus also taught in **Matthew 13:44** that discovering the kingdom of heaven - that is hearing and responding to the gospel - should result in joy because we know we are reconciled to God

Remember how the angel told the shepherds that they came to proclaim "good news of great joy" on the occasion of Jesus' birth in **Luke 2:10**

Then, **John 15:11** tells us that we will find joy in abiding in Christ which means being connected to him and living as he would have us live

Jesus spoke these words after teaching his disciples about how he was the true vine and they were the branches:

These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

And we see that joy will supernaturally occur in the life of a Christ-follower as the result of being guided by the Holy Spirit in **Galatians 5:22**

We will find joy as we read, study, and obey the Word of God as Paul wrote concerning the ministry of the apostles in **2Corinthians 1:24** as he wrote about the need to correct the believers in Corinth

No doubt we would find other examples of where we can find joy in the Bible

But to complete the circle let's look at one last passage that tells us of the future joy of the faithful Christ-follower, **Matthew 25:23**, where in rewarding the faithful servant in the parable of the talents, Jesus said –

"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"

Having seen what joy is and where joy can be found, let's turn our attention to the things we can do to cultivate joy in our lives

III. How can we cultivate biblical joy?

There was a song that was part of the soundtrack to the movie Urban Cowboy back in 1980 that became a popular crossover hit

It was performed by country artist, Johnny Lee, and contained the line "Lookin' for love in all the wrong places" as it chronicled one lonely man's search for true love

And we can be guilty of searching for joy in all the wrong places and then wondering why true, enduring joy eludes us

The first and foremost thing you can do to cause yourself to experience more joy in your life is to spend more time with God's Word

Turn in your Bible to Psalm 1 where we will look at the first two verses

[Ps 1:1-2] *Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.*

I'm sure you've seen the advertisements that promise the secret to weight loss or wealth or success and, frankly, most of them are a scam

But spending time in and with God's Word is the true key to finding and cultivating joy because it's in the pages of the Bible that we learn about God

Remember, Habakkuk wrote: "I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation" and the psalmist wrote about the fullness of joy residing in God's presence

Habakkuk didn't find it necessary to think positively about his situation or to deny the reality that God's judgment would cause pain and hardship

He faced those realities head on and named them

But he also remembered that God is bigger than all the hardships he might endure and that God had him secure in his grip of grace

Let's take just a quick tour of what God reveals about himself in the Bible and how learning about God serves to increase our joy

It's difficult to know where exactly to begin when describing God because all of God's attributes are equal in their value and God perfectly possesses and exemplifies all of his attributes equally

But, for the sake of needing to start somewhere, let's begin with **1John 4:8** which tells us straight out, "*God is love.*"

By the way, the fact that God is love is evidence of the Triune nature of God because love needs an object and there was love even before creation among the members of the Godhead as Jesus reveals in **John 17:24**

But God is love and he demonstrates that in fact that he sent his Son into the world so that we might live through him as the passage in 1John 4 continues

And to say that God is love means that God eternally gives of himself to others

God is also wise as we read in **Job 9:4**

And the fact that God is wise tells us that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals

And he is good meaning that he is the very definition of that which is worthy of approval and praise

We find this truth in **Luke 18:19** and many other places in the Old and New Testaments

God is also faithful as we read in **Numbers 23:19** telling us that we can rely completely on what God has said because he will always do what he has said and will fulfill all of the promises he has made

God is also merciful in that he demonstrates his goodness toward those who are in misery and distress

And he is patient in that he withholds punishment from those who persist in sin

And he is gracious as he extends his goodness to those who deserve only his wrath

God revealed that about himself to Moses in **Exodus 34:6** saying:

"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness"

However, God is also justice and righteousness which means he himself is the standard for what is right and he will always act in accordance to what is right

We see this as God continued revealing himself to Moses in **Exodus 34:7** where he says he forgives iniquity and transgression and sin, but will by no means clear the guilty

Those who chose to remain in their sin, to remain guilty, will ultimately face God's righteous wrath

We could go on and on with examples but those should suffice to show that we learn about God from his Word and learning about God should result in increased joy

And I doubt anyone could deny that spending more time in God's Word and less time looking at our phone or our TV would make us more joyful - even if it were just for a few minutes a day

Trading a poisonous environment that tears us down for a wholesome one that builds us up will always prove to be beneficial

Habakkuk reveals another way to increase our joy when he says *"I will rejoice in the Lord"*

Just like taking the time to express our thanks causes us to be even more thankful, expressing our joy will make us more joyful

Just as there is power in meditating on who God is and what he has done and what he has promised to do, there is also power in expressing the joy we feel as a result

Rejoicing begets additional joy because as we become aware of our present joy and the reasons for it, we can't help but find more joy

Remember, every good and perfect gift is from God - so if something brings you joy or happiness, say so

Make praising God a habit because joy is the byproduct of a grateful heart and rejoicing is the result when a heart is overflowing with joy

So take pleasure in all things whether large or small and make a joyful noise to the Lord [**Psalm 95:1**]

And develop a proper perspective to those things that are unpleasant

Your joy will be increased when you take the long view and evaluate all of the events of your life from God's eternal perspective

Look at your hardships through the lens that God is using them to develop your character - and that his end goal is to see you become more like his Son

Paul wrote in **Romans 5:1-5** –

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

It's easier to rejoice in hope of the glory of God than it is to rejoice in our sufferings isn't it?

But we have to remember that our suffering has a purpose in God's plan for us in that it helps us build our character

James wrote similarly in **James 1:2** where he said:

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds and then proceeds to show the results of those trials

Paul also gives us a formula for joy that summarizes this thought in **Philippians 4:4-7**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

The secret to cultivating joy is found in knowing God through his Word, expressing the joy we have, and in taking our trials to the Lord to gain his perspective on them

Conclusion

Notice that Paul gives a command in verse 4 there and he even repeats it for emphasis - rejoice in the Lord always

Once again we have to accept that where we see a command in Scripture we have to also accept that we have the ability to do what is commanded

We can and must be people who rejoice and that means we have to be people of joy

Let me ask you, when was the last time you truly contemplated who God is, your relationship to him, and all that he has done and all that he has promised to do for you?

When was the last time you allowed your heart to be filled with joy over those things?

Our tendency is to take things for granted and to have a "What have you done for me lately?" mentality causing us to have a joyless existence

And that would be a shame because, as followers of Jesus, we have the privilege to experience boundless joy because of our blessed condition

During our sojourn here we will experience bad times but we cannot allow our circumstances to steal our joy

Because we can always rejoice in who our God is and our relationship to him

And when we acknowledge and express our joy, we will experience thanksgiving living

Let's pray

Psalm 16:1-11 (page 453)

Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge.

I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you."

As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.

The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips.

The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot.

The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance.

I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.

I have set the LORD always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure.

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.

You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.