

“The Pursuit of Joy”

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

In my newsletter article for July, as we prepare to celebrate the 4th of July, I wrote about how I am reminded of the “inalienable rights” listed in the Declaration of Independence: “Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” I have had several conversations about “joy and happiness” lately, so I decided to see what other people have said.

What I found was that the writers who really had something to say did not equate joy with simple happiness. It is something much deeper. We have all known people who expressed outward happiness, but deep down had little joy. You can read the whole article in the newsletter. I also posted it on my Facebook page.

This weekend, happiness is found in parties and fireworks and celebrations. Joy is different. Joy is found in things like receiving grace and forgiveness. Joy is found in offering grace and forgiveness to others. Joy is found in contentment. St. Paul finds joy in eager anticipation of what lies ahead, not simply celebrating what has gone before. It is like the build-up to a major sporting event, the energy of a football stadium just before kickoff is palpable. As children of God, we wait in eager expectation of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting.

One of the writers I pondered as I was thinking about “happiness and joy” was Dr. Paul Brand, who was one of the people credited for helping to cure leprosy. He writes that our greatest joy in life comes from overcoming pain and difficult times.

Our society tries to mask pain caused by sin by self-medicating and becoming “comfortably numb.” The myth of the “party scene” lifestyle is that those living it have found their “pursuit of happiness.” Statistics and plenty of anecdotal evidence show that it is all a lie.

Dr. Brand argues that there is a reason those who lived through the Great Depression and WWII call it “the good ole days.” You will remember overcoming pain and stress much longer than you will remember a day lounging around the pool. Although, when you are going through the pain, no one gives thanks for the anticipated good feelings that will come on the other side.

St. Paul prayed three times that the “thorn in the flesh” would be taken away from him. God’s grace was sufficient, but Paul still wanted to get rid of the “thorn in the flesh.” What was that thorn? When you read the previous chapter, Paul has an entire catalogue of turmoil he has been enduring. But he is meant to endure. Paul says, “For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

The joy of repentance, the joy of forgiveness, the joy of contentment, and the joy of overcoming adversity are all very powerful and are primary in life. However, our joy will not be complete in this life. It will only be complete in the resurrection.

It is implied and generally understood that this sinful world will not be remembered in the life to come. And I personally, over the past 20 years, have argued that this means a complete blotting out of all memory of this life – as everything that we do or touch in this world is tainted by sin. God is very specific that He will remember our sins no more, and that our sins will not be

remembered against us. Why would we remember anything that is sinful?

However, I am currently leaning toward the argued point that the trouble, the difficulty, the sin of this world and the pain that it brings will be remembered in the same way that those who went through the Great Depression tend to remember those years. It was hard; it was difficult, but they speak of it with a twinkle in their eye. If you did not live those years, ask someone who did. Listen to how they speak of overcoming hardship.

WWII veterans go on Honor Flights. Life in the European or Pacific theatre was no picnic. There was real suffering. Those years are remembered with joy, pride, honor. The strength to persevere in the face of real pain and difficulty is often our greatest source of joy. Why do you think that these Mud Run Obstacle Course races are so popular? No matter how hard it is, the goal is to finish the race. Then you look back and find joy.

The point of all this is that our memory in heaven being a total blank slate may not fit with the biblical model. The saints in heaven clothed in white robes, washed in the blood of the Lamb, worshiping and praising Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, seeing the scars of nail marks in His hands and feet – the piercing in His side. This would all be very confusing to the saints if they did not know that they had come out of the “great tribulation.”

Now, don't get me wrong. We will not have painful memories of this life. Mothers will forget the pain of childbirth. But mothers will not forget that they have children. You will forget the pain of those who have lied to you, who have hurt you, who have wronged you. But you will remember the joy of this pain being overcome in Christ – which is why all the saints gather around the Lamb on His throne, as we see in John's Revelation.

If you are in pain today, don't imagine that this is an empty message. And do not imagine that you are alone. Read the Psalms and the prophets like Jeremiah or Habakkuk. Every generation has expressed frustration and anger at this sinful world. Even the people of God, even the prophets of God has been frustrated with God that we do not see results here and now.

Families of the Great Depression fearing for their next meal did not say at the time, "We are creating joyous memories that I can tell my grandchildren again and again and again." Soldiers storming the beaches on D-Day or enduring the bitter cold of the Battle of the Bulge were not thinking about the joy of an honor flight. There was no joy in the battle of Okinawa. There was real pain. But they served, and they did that which was their duty.

It is not in the here and now that we are going to feel the joy and receive the accolades for doing that which is our duty. We are reminded of our place within the kingdom of God. The Psalmist says, "I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked" [Ps. 84:10].

We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty. This is true for the fathers and mothers who bring their children to be baptized. This is true for soldiers in war; this is true for all soldiers of the cross. We endure the pain and burden of this world – all the time looking forward to joining the saints gathered around the throne and the Lamb. He still bears the scars in His hands, feet, and side where He paid for the guilt of your sin and mine. We are unworthy servants who have been blessed to be called to serve. All that we have done is that which is our duty. The pursuit of happiness is always fleeting. Be content in Christ and you will find joy. Amen