

CHOOSE JOY

BECAUSE HAPPINESS ISN'T ENOUGH

KAY WARREN



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*Those who plant in tears
will harvest with shouts of joy.*

PSALM 126:5 NLT

Only the heart that hurts has a right to joy.

LEWIS SMEDES

JOY Is MY INHERITANCE

Embracing the Permission to Be Joyful



You made the team!
You've been awarded a scholarship!
We'd like to hire you!
Will you marry me?
Great job on closing that deal!
You've just won an all-expense-paid vacation!
There's no sign of cancer!

These are some of life's sweetest moments—when all is right with the world, all your fondest hopes and wildest dreams come true, and your heart nearly explodes with happiness. You could make your own personal “it doesn't get any better than this” commercial.

But there are also other moments when nothing seems to go your way, everything that could go wrong does go wrong, and your fondest hopes and wildest dreams lie in shattered pieces at your feet. Those are the moments when your heart aches with the bitterness of unfulfilled longings, broken promises, or grief so powerful it threatens to take you to your knees.

Where does *joy* fit into these scenes from your life?

Sharing meaningful time with family and friends, having a great job, enjoying good health, being financially secure—aren't these the building blocks for a happy life? Most of us would say these happy moments create joy, don't they? Probably everyone would agree

that feelings of happiness are sometimes tough to come by so you better grab them when you can. Isn't that enough?

On the other hand, we're certain the painful moments rob us of joy; any woman who says she is experiencing joy as she stands at a graveside is only giving the socially correct answer, right? None of us believe her, but we nod our heads and say the right words so that no one knows that on the inside we doubt God's wisdom, his goodness, and his mercy.

Is joy really a possibility for messed-up and mixed-up pilgrims on this journey? Isn't *joy* just a biblical word that has nothing to do with real life?

Great questions. I mean, really great questions. I ought to know; they're my questions. I have a feeling you have asked similar questions—at least in your mind. You may never have felt comfortable voicing them out loud, but they have rolled around inside your head, especially in your most difficult moments.

Have you wondered why some people seem to experience deep and authentic joy in their daily lives—even in the toughest times—and others can't seem to find it no matter how hard they search? Many of us eventually give up the pursuit, assuming we were unfortunate enough to have been standing on the wrong side of the door when God was handing out joy. It has often seemed to me that only a few lucky people received the gift of joy and that fewer still know joy's "secret."

I'm here to say, I've learned that's just not true! Even though it may not feel that way to you at this moment, joy is available to you. You may be thinking, *I don't experience joy as much as other people do. It's just not my thing. Or, Joy means living in denial of all the pain in the world.* But as I've discovered in my own life, joy is not about your circumstances or about how you feel. It is definitely not about living in denial and ignoring sorrow or pain. Joy is something much deeper, richer, more stable, and definitely more accessible than you might have thought.

That's the beauty of the joy God offers. You no longer need to live in fear or worry, because God's joy will always be available to you. In this world you will have trouble, Jesus says. But you can still take heart. You can still receive joy. You are not dependent on anyone or anything other than God and yourself to know joy.

There's one promise I want to give you as we start: I will be honest with you about my life and my search for joy—maybe more honest than you will find comfortable. I will not gloss over my doubts, failures, and sins, and I will admit to you—and myself—my sweaty, middle-of-the-night wrestling with God over issues of faith. I will let you into the internal workings of my faith in process because I find my own faith bolstered when I know someone else is struggling and sometimes succeeding in letting Christ be formed in her. Spiritual growth doesn't happen automatically and is rarely pretty; we will

all be “under construction” until the day we die and we finally take hold of the “life that is truly life” (1 Tim. 6:19). So let’s walk side by side for a while, and I’ll share with you what I’m learning about how to choose joy every day . . . in the best and worst of times . . . in every moment.

1

Seeking a Life of Joy

*He will yet fill your mouth with laughter
and your lips with shouts of joy.*

JOB 8:21

Pain is inevitable,
but misery is optional.
We cannot avoid pain,
but we can avoid joy.

TIM HANSEL

Because I grew up in a pastor's home, went to a Christian college, married a pastor, became a Bible teacher, and co-wrote a book on systematic theology for the average Christian, you might naturally assume that I have my spiritual act totally together and have this joy "thing" mastered. I wish I could say that was an accurate assumption, but truthfully, I wrote this book because I don't always have it all together! You and I share similar struggles and questions, and I need joy just as much as you do.

Joy does not come easily to me; I'm definitely more of a glass-half-empty kind of gal. In fact, I've struggled with low-level depression as far back as I can remember. As a little girl I was emotionally intense—I cried easily, agonized over the pain others felt, and carried the weight of the world on my small shoulders. So I'm not talking to you about joy from the perspective of one of those deliriously happy, peppy people who never have a down day. Some days I'm thrilled just to survive!

The Bible gives some commands that are extremely hard to understand and even harder to live out. One of the most difficult commands is to forgive our enemies. In light of the terrible cruelty and evil we can inflict on each other, this

seems like asking an armchair athlete to climb Mt. Everest—impossible. The Bible also says not to worry about anything. *Anything? Really?* Many of us spend a good portion of every waking hour worried or anxious about something. How could God reasonably expect us not to worry? But to me, even harder than either of those two commands is the one found in James 1:2: “When troubles come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy” (NLT).

Are you kidding me? When trouble comes my way, my first thoughts aren’t usually about experiencing great joy. My typical reaction is more along the lines of fear, panic,

When troubles
come your way,
consider it an
opportunity for
great joy (NLT).

worry, and even hopelessness. At the very least, I reserve the right to gripe and moan about my troubles. Hardly an opportunity for great joy.

It’s really because of my own struggles to live with joy that I began to explore why my experiences didn’t match up with Scripture. I studied the life of Jesus Christ and observed the way biblical characters such as King David; Mary, the mother of Jesus; the apostle Paul; and James, the half-brother of Jesus, reacted to trouble and sorrow and hard times. For instance, the apostle Paul wrote in Romans 5:

We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert to whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can't round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit! (vv. 3–5 Message)

I saw a Grand Canyon-sized gap between their lives and mine, and it began to bother me. It was clear that joy—even in pain—was something the biblical writers expected Christians to experience on a regular basis, but I wasn't. Wondering what was different about their faith that allowed them to respond to their circumstances with joy launched me on an intensely personal search. Why was there a discrepancy between my experiences and theirs? I needed to know how to bridge the gigantic gap that was keeping me from living a joyful life.

I'll fill you in on what I'm learning as we go along, but let me jump to the conclusion of the search and tell you the bottom line: *Joy is a choice*. Nothing I will say in the rest of this book is more critical to the way you live out your years than that small sentence. Joy is a choice. The level of joy you experience is completely and totally up to you. It is not dependent on anyone else—what they do or

don't do, how they behave or don't behave. Joy cannot be manipulated by the actions of puny human beings. It is not dependent on the amount of sadness or suffering or difficulties you endure. Joy cannot be held hostage to fear, pain, anger, disappointment, sadness, or grief. At the end of any given day, the amount of joy you experienced is the exact amount of joy you chose to experience. You, my friend, are in charge. The sooner you embrace this pivotal reality, the sooner you can begin to live a more joyful life.

The Bell Curve of Joy

Each of us approaches the idea of joy differently. You may remember from a high school or college astronomy class the Gaussian Probability Distribution—yeah, probably not—but in simple English, think of a bell curve. At one end of the bell curve are people who don't struggle much to have joy. Their natural temperament is optimistic and upbeat—the glass is half full. Sometimes they really annoy me because they never stop smiling and they seem to float through life with a cheerful, carefree, lighthearted attitude. I mutter to myself, *I wonder if she'd be smiling so big if she had my problems*. Maybe she really is living a charmed life; life hasn't slapped her around a whole lot yet. But another possibility is that life *has* slapped her around and she has done some serious spiritual work and learned how to access

joy every day. Regardless, some women are on the positive end of the bell curve.

The vast majority of us are in the middle of the bell curve. Life isn't awful; we're moderately happy, not too high and not too low. We don't normally get overly discouraged or depressed. We admit to feeling tired a lot, perhaps a bit bored by the routine, and sometimes even flat. Daily *joy*? I'm not so sure. But, we hastily add, nothing is really *wrong*.

As the bell curve moves downward, there is a smaller group of people at the other end. They are hiding—or not hiding—a cavernous well of depression. Getting out of bed every morning is a chore, and the pleasures of life are gone; smiling and laughing are hard to do. Joy has simply evaporated. That might be because of stress in a relationship, a job change, physical illness, or even deep grief or loss. While women with mild depression can bounce back fairly quickly, those traveling the hard road of profound loss often need years to process their grief before they find their emotional and spiritual equilibrium restored. But the accompanying depression can leave them feeling guilty because they know they're "supposed" to be joyful and they're not.

Depression might also be present because of a chemical imbalance. We don't talk about this much, but many Christians battle depression and stress because of a biochemical imbalance. Some women have bipolar disorder, characterized by dramatic mood swings between periods

of wild euphoria and disabling depression. Schizophrenia, personality disorders, or many other forms of mental illness—some mild, some severe—plague Christian families just as often as non-Christian families. Physical disability is obvious to the casual observer, but mental brokenness can hide beneath a “normal”-looking exterior. My friend Shannon Royce calls this having a “hidden disability.”¹ Unfortunately, because of our innate desire to deny our problems and the hardline stance of those who believe any psychological disruption is mostly a matter of poor discipleship, Christians are often reluctant to talk about mental health issues. This leaves millions suffering alone, ashamed, and, worst of all, unsupported by the church. The stigma is real, and it hurts.

As this curve continues, there’s an even smaller group of people at the far end who are contemplating suicide. For some of you, you’ve given life your best shot, and it’s just not enough anymore. You’re worn out from the struggle to survive another day, and escaping your painful circumstances has begun to dominate your thoughts. You may even wonder if your family would be better off without you. You’ve certainly thought that *you* would be better off without experiencing such pain. Joy is as alien to you as a foreign country. It’s so far off in the distance that you believe you will never reach it again, nor are you sure you have the energy to try. You find your struggle extremely

difficult to talk about, especially if you're a Christ follower; if mentioning mental illness at church is a risky topic, then talking about suicide or suicidal thoughts can be the ultimate taboo in church.

It's possible you're reading this book because someone who cares very much for you is aware of the enormous battle you're fighting and longs for you to experience joy once more. As John Eldredge says, "The story of your life is the story of a long and brutal assault on your heart by the one who knows what you could be and fears it."² The enemy of your heart, Satan, does not want you to leave the place of despair, but the lover of your wounded heart, Jesus Christ, has a better plan for you, and it includes joy.

Wherever you are on the bell curve, God has a tender word of encouragement for you: There is concrete, genuine hope for joy in your life. Even if you are in the middle of despair right now, you can experience joy. It is not out of your reach! Happiness in and of itself will never be enough; it's simply too flimsy, too unreliable, too unpredictable. You were meant for something more. You were meant to experience a life of joy.

You were meant
for something
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Created for Joy

I love a book Lewis Smedes wrote many years ago called *How Can It Be All Right When Everything Is All Wrong?* Smedes writes, “You and I were created for joy, and if we miss it, we miss the reason for our existence! Moreover, the reason Jesus Christ lived and died on earth was to restore us to the joy we have lost. . . . His Spirit comes to us with the power to believe that joy is our birthright because the Lord has made this day for us.”³ Jesus died to *restore the joy* that is our inheritance, the joy we lost when Adam and Eve rebelled against God and set the stage for our personal spiritual rebellion.

The good news is that when we realize we’ve been living in spiritual rebellion against God—not necessarily through gross, terrible actions but by an attitude of “I don’t need you, God”—we have the opportunity to receive Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. And along with Jesus Christ, we receive his Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:4–7). And with the Holy Spirit comes this beautiful gift of joy, our birthright—not one option out of many but our *birthright* (see Gal. 5:22).

God *created* us to be joyful. There’s really no doubt about it. But God has left the decision whether to access that joy up to us. You and I get to decide if we’re going to choose joy—created by God, bought and paid for by Jesus’s death, given as a personal gift from the Holy Spirit—or not.

When you think about it like that, it's hard to imagine why any of us would ever refuse God's gift of joy. But sometimes we do.

Parallel Train Tracks

I used to think that life came in waves: There was a wave of good and pleasant circumstances followed by a wave of bad and unpleasant circumstances, with a lot of ebb and flow in between. Or life was a series of hills and valleys; sometimes we're up, then we're down. But I've come to realize that life is much more like a set of parallel train tracks, with joy and sorrow running inseparably throughout our days.

Every day of your life good things happen. Beauty, pleasure, fulfillment, and perhaps even excitement occur. That's the track of joy. But every day of your life also holds disappointment, challenges, struggles, and perhaps even losses for you or those you love. That's the track of sorrow. Most of us try to "outsmart" the sorrow track by concentrating our efforts on the joy track, as if by our positive outlook or outright denial of reality we can make the sorrow track go away. That's impossible, because joy and sorrow will always be linked. And in the strange paradox of the universe, at the exact moment you and I are experiencing pain, we are also aware of the sweetness of loving and the beauty still to be found. Likewise, at the exact moment we are full of

delirious delight, we have the nagging realization that things still aren't quite perfect. No matter how "positive" we think or how hard we try to visualize only happiness, the sorrow track remains. One of our toughest challenges in life is to learn how to live on both of those tracks at the same time.

But there's hope! Look ahead with me.

My young grandsons are train fanatics, so I often take them to a quaint outdoor train station where Amtrak stops many times a day. When the ticket agent isn't looking and the coast is completely clear, we stand on the train tracks together and look ahead as far as we can see, hoping to catch the very first sign of an approaching train. As we stand on the tracks and stare into the distant, bright horizon, those parallel tracks become one, no longer distinguishable as two separate tracks.

That's the way it will be for us too. During our lifetime, we "stand on the tracks" looking for signs of Jesus Christ's return. We watch for the sights and sounds that will alert us that his appearance is very close. We stare into the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of him. One day, in the brightness of his coming, we will meet him face to face. And when we do, the tracks of joy and sorrow will merge. The sorrow will disappear forever, and only the joy will remain. And everything will finally make complete sense. But until that day comes, we live with the parallel tracks of joy . . . and sorrow.

The Definition of Joy

Why are we so reluctant to believe that joy can be a reality for us? I can think of several possible reasons.

The first is that most of us don't have joy models. We don't know many people who have bridged the gap between their experience and what Scripture teaches. Most people we look at are swimming, just like us, in deep waters of very little joy.

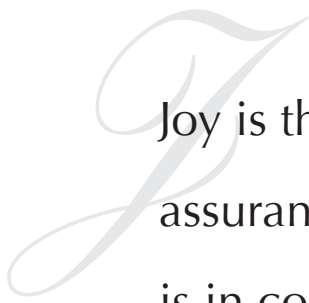
Do you think you can name two people who live a life of joy the way the Bible talks about it? Some of you will instantly raise your hands and say, "Absolutely! I know tons of people who are joyful!" I don't mean people who are merely natural extroverts and smile and laugh a lot. I mean men and women who embody the James 1 kind of response to troubles: those who consider it an opportunity for great joy. That might change the number of joyful people you think you know. So let's keep going. Can you think of five people? How about ten people? (I feel sort of like Abraham bargaining with God to save Sodom and Gomorrah!) I seriously doubt that many of you can honestly name ten people who live a joyful life. A few years ago I tried to come up with a list of people who embody what it means to live with joy. I finally thought of two people; one of them was dead, and the other one wasn't me! Without role models to follow, we face a daunting task to figure out what it means to live with joy.

Another reason we're hesitant to believe that joy is within our reach is because we examine our own lives and see how far off we are from the "consider it great joy" response. We say to ourselves, *One of these days I'll go after joy, but not today. I mean, if it falls into my lap, that's great. But I'd be happy just to get through today. Really, I'd be thrilled just to get a good night's sleep! Joy is too big a stretch for me right now.*

So based on the facts that we don't see joy modeled for us and that our own life experience doesn't match what we read in the Bible, many of us have concluded that joy is not going to happen for us. If it does, it will be a total surprise. It will not be anything we can control.

That's why our definition of joy is crucial. If our definition is inadequate, we can wrongly assume that joy and happiness are synonymous and that having happy feelings must mean we are joyful—or that the lack of happy feelings must mean we don't have joy. We spend the day at an amusement park, or a sporting event, or have a fantastic vacation and conclude that the happy feelings we're experiencing equal joy; or we observe a woman who always seems upbeat and optimistic and think she has joy.

Not necessarily. You can't see into her heart. You can't see into her life to know how she responds when tough times come. You're looking at the face she presents to the world, and you're concluding that's what joy is.



Joy is the settled
assurance that God
is in control of all the
details of my life, the
quiet confidence that
ultimately everything
is going to be all right,
and the determined
choice to praise
God in all things.

But if joy is not warm, fuzzy feelings or a smiling face, and it is not dependent on circumstances, what is it?

A few years ago I read a quote by Paul Sailhamer, who said that joy comes from knowing God is in control of our lives.⁴ I liked that a lot, but I wanted more words around it to adequately express what I believe Scripture teaches about how to live a joyful life. I've written a definition of joy and memorized it so I can remind myself of the powerful truths when I'm feeling shaky: Joy is the settled assurance that God is in control of all the details of my life, the quiet confidence that ultimately everything is going to be all right, and the determined choice to praise God in all things.

Did you catch that? Joy is a settled conviction ABOUT God. It's a quiet confidence IN God. And joy is a determined choice to give my praise TO God.

I'm going to repeat this definition throughout the book because it needs to seep into your soul. My prayer is that you will memorize it too and that it will come to your mind when your world seems to be falling apart. I know how profoundly my life is changing as I develop a settled conviction *about* God and his goodness. My confidence *in* God is growing as I trust that he is working behind the scenes to fit all the details of my life into his good plan. And my determination to give my praise *to* God is slowly leading me to the joy I've always longed for. I want the same for you!

When I say, “Everything will be all right,” it’s not the equivalent of saying, “Don’t worry, be happy” or some other nifty little phrase. Believing that ultimately everything is going to be all right takes into account car accidents, cancer, bankruptcy, miscarriage, depression, and every other grief we face. Choosing to believe that God is always working, knitting together the fragments of our lives, always in control of it all, means that life *will* work together for our good and his glory.

Of course, we want all the answers now, today, this moment. And we want more than simple answers. We want explanations in triplicate with a certification that God is qualified to make those decisions, thank you very much. That’s why the word *ultimately* is in our definition of joy. God doesn’t promise answers or explanations on demand. He promises joy.

So joy is much more than external things. It’s much more than that happy, giddy feeling that may come every once in a while. The joy that God speaks of in his Word is something you can count on. It has nothing to do with the circumstances of our lives—and that, I’ve discovered, is very good news.

In the chapters to come, we will look at how we know God created us for joy and how Jesus’s life of joy and sorrow gives us permission to choose joy even in the midst of pain. We’ll also look at how to develop habits of the mind and

heart that free us to choose joy every day in our thoughts, words, and interactions with others.

Joy is not just a nice add-on to the Christian life, the bow on top of the package. It is God's *purpose* for your life. It's time to embrace it!

PRAYER

Father, I want to choose joy in my life. Rekindle hope in my heart. Help me to keep seeking the joy that belongs to me in Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus, amen.

For Reflection and Application

1. What do you allow to hold you back from living a life of joy?
2. Take a minute to read the definition of joy on page 31. Be still and quiet as you reflect on the words. Which words are easiest to accept into your life? Which are the hardest words to access?