

Steve Whitacre

SESSION 1 | Fighting *For* Joy, Fighting *With* Joy

“Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good!” (Psalm 34:8)

“May all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you! May those who love your salvation say evermore, ‘God is great!’” (Psalm 70:4)

“As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God.” (Psalm 42:1)

I. INTRODUCTION

“...they are converted; they experience the new birth; and they advance into their new life joyfully certain that they have left all the old headaches and heartaches behind them. And then they find that it is not like that at all. Longstanding problems of temperament, of personal relationships, of felt wants, of nagging temptations are still there—sometimes, indeed, intensified. God does not make their circumstances notably easier; rather the reverse. Dissatisfaction recurs over wife, or husband, or parents, or in-laws, or children, or colleagues or neighbors. Temptations and bad habits which their conversion experience seemed to have banished for good reappear. As the first great waves of joy rolled over them during the opening weeks of their Christian experience, they had really felt that all problems had solved themselves, but now they see that it was not so, and that the trouble-free life which they were promised has not materialized. Things which got them down before they were Christians are threatening to get them down again. What are they to think now? [*to be continued...*]” J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 245.

II. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY “DESIRING GOD”—IN SCRIPTURE AND IN HISTORY?

A. Desire and Delight

Desire: Ps. 73:25–26; Lam. 3:24; Ps. 142:5; Ps. 16:2, 5; Ps. 42:1; Ps. 63:1, 3; Isa. 26:9; Phil 1:23, 3:7–8

Delight: Hab. 3:17–18; Ps. 43:4; Ps. 35:27; Ps. 111:2; Ps. 17:15; Ps. 37:4; Phil. 4:4; Ps. 16:11; Matt 13:44.

“The first thought that comes to most of our minds (I tried this on my eight-year-old daughter) is that *delight* (with its synonyms) is what we experience when the thing we enjoy is present, not just future. But *desire* (with its synonyms) is what we experience when the thing we enjoy is not present but, we hope, coming to us in the future.

“I think that's true, but oversimplified, for several reasons. One is that many desires are themselves pleasant. That is, the desire is itself a pleasure, not just a longing for a pleasure... The desire is part of the satisfaction.

“Another reason it's an oversimplification to say that in *pleasure* the thing enjoyed is present but in *desire* the thing enjoyed is not yet present is that desire would not exist if the thing enjoyed had not already been tasted. That's how the heart comes to feel something is desirable. Desire is awakened by tastes of pleasure. The taste may be ever so small. But if there is no taste at all of the desirability of something, then there will be no desire for it. In other words, desire is a form of the very pleasure that is anticipated with the arrival of the thing desired. It is, you might say, the pleasure itself experienced in the form of anticipation.” John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God*, 26.

“The difference between desire for God and delight in God is important mainly to make clear that finite creatures like us, who have a spiritual taste for the glory of God, will always want more of God than we presently experience even in eternity.” John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God*, 27.

“It should be obvious from this, but may not be, that desire and delight have this in common: Neither is the Object desired or delighted in. God is. I make this obvious point because all of us from time to time speak loosely and say that the aim of our pursuit is *joy*. Or we say that we want to be happy. Those are not false or evil statements. A Christian means: I aim to pursue joy *in God* so that the infinitely valuable objective reality of the universe, God, will get all the glory possible from my life. ‘I want to be happy’ may be Christian shorthand for ‘I want to know the One, and the only One, who is in himself all I have ever longed for in all my desires to be happy.’” John Piper, *When I Don't Desire God*, 29.

B. Desiring God in the Scriptures

“Be **glad** in the LORD, and **rejoice**, O righteous, and **shout for joy**, all you upright in heart!” (Psalm 32:11)

“**Shout for joy** in the LORD, O you righteous! **Praise** befits the upright.” (Psalm 33:1)

“O God, you are my God; earnestly I **seek** you; my soul **thirsts** for you;
my flesh **faints** for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” (Psalm 63:1)

“How **lovely** is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! My soul **longs**, yes, **faints** for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh **sing for joy** to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O LORD of hosts, my King and my God. **Blessed** are those who **dwelt** in your house, **ever singing your praise!** **Blessed** are those whose **strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.**” (Psalm 84:1–5)

“Agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you... For then you will **delight** yourself in the Almighty and **lift up your face** to God.” (Job 22:26)

“The kingdom of heaven is like **treasure** hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his **joy** he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.” (Matthew 13:44)

“Finally, my brothers, **rejoice in the Lord.** To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you.” (Philippians 3:1)

“**Count it all joy**, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,” (James 1:2)

“Because **you did not serve the LORD your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart**, because of the abundance of all things, therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the LORD will send against you, in hunger and thirst, in nakedness, and lacking everything. And he will put a yoke of iron on your neck until he has destroyed you.” (Deuteronomy 28:47–48)

“He has made everything **beautiful** in its time. Also, he has put **eternity into man’s heart**, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:11)

C. Desiring God in the Church

“You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.” Augustine, *The Confessions*, I.i.

“God threatens terrible things if we will not be happy.” Jeremy Taylor

“The greatest difficulty in conversion is to win the heart to God; and the greatest difficulty after conversion is to keep the heart with God.’ He described keeping the heart as ‘the very pinch and stress of religion’ and ‘the great business of a Christian’s life.’” John Flavel, in Matthew Bingham, *A Heart Aflame for God*, 23.

Q. 1. What is the chief end of man?

A. Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.

Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q1.

“While I was staying at Nailworth, it pleased the Lord to teach me a truth, irrespective of human instrumentality, as far as I know, the benefit of which I have not lost, though now...more than forty years have since passed away. The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever, that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was, to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not, how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished.” George Müller

“If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.” C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 3, Chapter 11.

III. DESIRING GOD IS A FIGHT

A. Fighting For Joy

Two questions to ask yourself this week:

1.

2.

“Such is the secret of ‘rejoicing in the Lord always,’ namely, to choose what you think about. It is as simple—and as difficult! as that. Can we really choose what we are going to think about? In these days when we are endlessly overstimulated from outside and the ever-present TV encourages the passive mind-set that makes us wait to be entertained, the idea of regularly choosing themes for our thoughts seems strange to the point of freakiness. But Paul has no doubt that thought-control is possible. He actually commands it. ‘Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is

gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things' (Phil. 4:8 RSV). Controlling and directing one's thoughts is a habit, and the more one practices it, the better one becomes at it." J. I. Packer, *God's Plans for You*, 124.

B. Fighting With Joy

"Then he said to them, 'Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'" (Nehemiah 8:10)

"The Christian doctrine of suffering explains, I believe, a very curious fact about the world we live in. The settled happiness and security which we all desire, God withholds from us by the very nature of the world: but joy, pleasure, and merriment, He has scattered broadcast. We are never safe, but we have plenty of fun, and some ecstasy. It is not hard to see why. The security we crave would teach us to rest our hearts in this world and pose an obstacle to our return to God: a few moments of happy love, a landscape, a symphony, a merry meeting with our friends, a bath or a football match, have no such tendency. Our Father refreshes us on the journey with some pleasant inns, but will not encourage us to mistake them for home." C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 116.

"Behold, what I have seen to be good and fitting is to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all the toil with which one toils under the sun the few days of his life that God has given him, for this is his lot. Everyone also to whom God has given wealth and possessions and power to enjoy them, and to accept his lot and rejoice in his toil—this is the gift of God." (Ecclesiastes 5:18–19)

IV. CONCLUSION

“[continued...]The truth here is that the God of whom it was said, "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms" (Is 40:11), is very gentle with very young Christians, just as mothers are with very young babies. Often the start of their Christian career is marked by great emotional joy, striking providences, remarkable answers to prayer and immediate fruitfulness in their first acts of witness; thus God encourages them and establishes them in "the life." But as they grow stronger, and are able to bear more, he exercises them in a tougher school. He exposes them to as much testing by the pressure of opposed and discouraging influences as they are able to bear—not more (see the promise, 1 Cor 10:13), but equally not less (see the admonition, Acts 14:22). Thus he builds our character, strengthens our faith, and prepares us to help others. Thus he crystallizes our sense of values. Thus he glorifies himself in our lives, making his strength perfect in our weakness... There is nothing unnatural, therefore, in an increase of temptations, conflicts and pressures as the Christian goes on with God—indeed, something would be wrong if it did not happen. But the Christian who has been told that the normal Christian life is unshadowed and trouble-free can only conclude, as experiences of inadequacy and imperfection pile in upon him, that he must have lapsed from normal. "Something's gone wrong," he will say, "it isn't working any more!" And his question will be, how can it be made to "work" again?" J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 244–45.

“This is the ultimate reason, from our standpoint, why God fills our lives with troubles and perplexities of one sort and another: it is *to ensure that we shall learn to hold him fast*. The reason why the Bible spends so much of its time reiterating that God is a strong rock, a firm defense, and a sure refuge and help for the weak, is that God spends so much of his time bringing home to us that we are weak, both mentally and morally, and dare not trust ourselves to find, or to follow, the right road... And God wants us to feel that our way through life is rough and perplexing, so that we may learn thankfully to lean on him. Therefore he takes steps to drive us out of self-confidence to trust in himself—in the classical scriptural phrase for the secret of the godly life, to ‘wait on the Lord.’” J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, 250.

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