

LORRAINE HILL

Reclaiming Your *joy*

A BIBLE STUDY ON
CONQUERING YOUR
JOY-STEALERS

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PART I:

Embracing Our Destinies



Week 1:

Our Great Calling

Day 1: The Cry of Scripture

Day 2: The Pursuit of Happiness

Day 3: The Fullness of Fellowship

Day 4: Whole-hearted Devotion

Day 5: Choosing Joy

Key Thoughts for the Week

- Day 1: Scripture's resounding theme is that Christians should experience abundant, overflowing joy.
- Day 2: Joy remains elusive for some of us because we do not pursue joy—we pursue happiness, that transitory feeling of fulfillment.
- Day 3: The depth of joy we experience depends on the depth of our relationship with the LORD.
- Day 4: A full relationship with the LORD means that we whole-heartedly devote ourselves to him and do not flirt with the world.
- Day 5: No one takes our joy from us. We choose whether we will relinquish it because of a situation, person, or sin or whether we will cultivate and nurture it.

Day 1: The Cry of Scripture

Rejoice in the LORD always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Philippians 4:4

C. S. Lewis wrote, “Joy is the serious business of Heaven.”¹ It is also the serious business of earth. As Christians, we should live joy-filled lives. We should experience abundant, overflowing joy, and not just in isolated instances. But are we truly experiencing this type of joy? Or are we instead living day by day, struggling to get by, wearied and tired? If we are honest, we do not always experience the joy that Jesus so readily offered. Sometimes we live frustrated and discouraged lives, succumbing to the ways of the world and to Satan. The Christian walk sometimes seems more like a burden than a joy. Yet Jesus did not redeem us from our sin so that we would live miserable and downcast lives. He redeemed us so that we could be reconciled to the Father and experience abundant life through him. Abundant, overflowing joy is our birthright in Christ!

Compare joy with happiness.

Are happiness and joy the same thing? Explain.

How does John 17:13 describe the joy that Christians should experience?

What additional insight do you receive about joy from the following verses?

Romans 15:13 _____

1 Peter 1:8 _____

How can joy serve as a witness for our LORD?

Are you filled with full, inexpressible joy? Do others comment on your joy?

As we speak of joy, it is important that we understand the difference between happiness and joy. We often use these words interchangeably, yet there is a great difference between them. Happiness is transient, momentary, and fleeting. It is dependent on the fulfillment of a need at a moment in time. If the need is not fulfilled, the feeling of happiness vanishes. Joy goes much deeper than happiness, for joy does not depend on our circumstances, feelings, or emotions. True joy is permanent and unchanging. It is a sense of well-being and peace that is unaffected by our external circumstances, an inner gladness of heart. For example, at the Last Supper, Jesus, knowing of his impending death, was able to sing hymns and praise to the Father (Mark 14:26). Jesus had a joy that was independent of his circumstances. The LORD does not promise us ease of circumstances but rather joy in the midst of our hardships and difficulties. Neither circumstances, nor trials, nor the world can steal our joy unless we let them, for joy is the triumph of eternity over the moment.

In John 17:13, Jesus offers his disciples full joy, not a partial joy dependent on people or a limited joy dependent on circumstances, but complete joy. First Peter 1:8 elaborates even further and describes joy as inexpressible. The Greek word translated *inexpressible* means “unutterable.”² Our joy bubbles forth so much that it overtakes us and is unutterable or unspeakable. That’s a beautiful visual, isn’t it? The world should stand amazed at the joy we possess. It should shock their senses because it is so contrary to the culture. Is this the type of joy we are experiencing—unutterable, shocking joy? Are others noticing our joy?

As we speak of joy, we must also remember that joy is expressed in many ways. Sometimes we express our joy through a burst of emotions, like shouting and singing, while at other times through quiet silence and prayer. Some people are naturally more expressive; hence their joy is more visual. This does not mean that the less expressive person is not experiencing joy, merely that it is displayed in a different form. Joy is not, however, walking around with an artificial smile all day. Some events in life, like the loss of a loved one, will break our hearts. Joy is not walking around with a forced smile during these times as if nothing has happened. Joy is the assurance of knowing our LORD is in control, will see us through the difficult time, and will bring good out of the situation.

Several years ago, my husband and I experienced a very difficult trial in our lives. Our twin boys were born prematurely at twenty eight weeks, weighing a little over two pounds each. They spent months in the hospital, fighting for their lives. It was a long, hard road for them and for us. Even when they finally came home, they still wore monitors for their breathing and had to have supplemental oxygen. Slowly over weeks and months, they gained strength and became healthy little boys. It was an incredibly difficult and challenging time for me. I could never have made it through this season in my life without the LORD. He carried me when I was physically exhausted, he loved me when I was emotionally overwhelmed, and he encouraged me when I was spiritually weak. He also provided me with his joy. During this time, I did not walk around with an artificial smile on my face, but I had a deep-seated peace and joy, knowing that God would help me and sustain me. This is what our LORD offers us – a supernatural joy that transcends the difficult circumstances of this life and enables us to not only endure the hardest of times but also to rejoice in them.

Who are three of the most joyful people that you know? What makes these people so joyful?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What do the following Scriptures reveal about joy?

Psalms 32:11 _____

1 Thessalonians 5:16 _____

Romans 14:17 _____

Try to memorize Philippians 4:4.

_____ in the LORD _____.

I will say it again: _____ !

Challenge

How does a joyful heart overflow into the different parts of our lives? Match the verses with the appropriate answer.

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| _____ Psalm 122:1 | A) give cheerfully and joyfully |
| _____ 2 Corinthians 9:7 | B) joyfully accept the loss of property |
| _____ Philippians 1:3-4 | C) rejoice in worship |
| _____ Hebrews 10:34 | D) pray with joy |

Joy is not an isolated act for us as Christians that we experience once a week, once a month, or after reaching a certain goal. We should experience joy consistently in our lives. "Rejoice in the LORD always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). No matter the circumstances of our lives, we should rejoice. Scripture does not tell us to rejoice only when we have a good-paying job, finally obtain

the big house, reach a milestone, experience good health, receive recognition for our achievements, or have a house full of children. The resounding theme of Scripture is simply rejoice! Rejoice when you receive a promotion, and rejoice when you receive a demotion. Rejoice when you are rich, and rejoice when you are poor. Rejoice when you experience good health, and rejoice when you experience poor health. Rejoice, rejoice, rejoice. “But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful” (Psalm 68:3).

As joy permeates our hearts, it naturally overflows into all of the different parts of our lives. The Greek word most commonly used for *joy* in the New Testament is *chara* and means “joy, rejoicing, gladness.”³ So our *chara*, our joy, becomes evident through our actions and spills forth into the various areas of our lives. For example, when we give, we give joyously. When we serve, we serve with gladness. When we pray, we pray joyfully.

Now that we have spent a few minutes to better understand what true joy is, how do we obtain it, and why does it seem so elusive at times? How can we learn to rejoice always, even in the darkest of circumstances? Can we really experience lives filled with such inexpressible joy that our community notices and is awed by our LORD? This study will help us to better understand how to obtain *consistent* joy in our lives and the various things that can hinder it.

Exercise

To help us better determine why our joy fluctuates, let’s keep a joy journal in which we list three or four different activities for each day and how they affect our joy level.

Date	Event	Level of Joy (0 - joyless, 5 - joyful)
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Day 2: The Pursuit of Happiness

“Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.”

Ecclesiastes 1:2

One of the reasons that joy sometimes seems elusive to us is because we do not pursue joy—we pursue happiness, that transitory feeling of fulfillment. We may inadvertently seek happiness in relationships, work, education, hobbies, entertainment, sports, and in so many other areas.

Few people in Scripture better depict the pursuit of happiness than King Solomon. He was the tenth son of King David and the third king of Israel and reigned for forty years around 1,000 BC. Although King David’s reign encompassed much war and fighting, Solomon reigns during a time of unparalleled peace and prosperity. Scripture describes King Solomon as having greater riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth at the time. He also has a sizable harem and numerous wives. Yet with all his wealth, wisdom, and women, he does not seem to enjoy his life. In fact, he characterizes much of his life as “Meaningless! Meaningless!... Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes 1:2). Let’s explore some of the different areas in which King Solomon seeks fulfillment.

Read Ecclesiastes 1:12–18. Where does King Solomon seek fulfillment? Does he find it?

Have you ever sought fulfillment through intellectual pursuits? What about in your spiritual journey—are you driven to acquire more Bible knowledge or to really learn more about God?

King Solomon has the unique distinction of being the wisest king in Scripture, other than our LORD Jesus. Over his lifetime, he composes over three thousand proverbs and writes over one thousand songs (1 Kings 4:32). He is wiser than anyone who has ruled before him in Jerusalem and obtains such a reputation that rulers from other distant nations seek him out to witness his wisdom (1 Kings 10:1-13). And yet, with all his wisdom and learning, Solomon learns that joy and fulfillment is not found in the acquisition of pure facts and knowledge. Philosophy and human knowledge do little to fulfill the void in our hearts. In fact, knowledge without love has the potential to create pride in us (1 Corinthians 8:1).

King Solomon's quest for knowledge still challenges many of us today. Just because we do not seek fulfillment through intellectual pursuits does not mean that we can easily dismiss this application. What about our spiritual journey? As we sit in our quiet times, are we trying to learn more facts, or do we truly desire to draw closer to God? Are we anticipating that God will reveal a new truth to us so that we can appear more spiritual before others? Bible knowledge can have the unsavory habit of creating a spiritual pride in us. We cannot let Satan deceive us. Even in Christian circles, we can easily substitute seeking God for seeking the knowledge of God. We can slowly and subtly become more enamored with the possession of God's knowledge than with the possession of God himself.

What do you learn about King Solomon's pursuit of pleasure from Ecclesiastes 2:1-3, 8-11 and 1 Kings 11:1-3? Does his pursuit of pleasure fulfill him?

Is it wrong to seek fulfillment *only* through pleasure? Explain.

King Solomon also seeks joy and fulfillment in pleasure—through women and alcohol. He denies himself nothing and refuses his heart no pleasure, but in the end, he is left empty and unfulfilled.

We too sometimes pursue pleasure in many avenues but forget to seek fulfillment in our LORD. And our desire for pleasure is not always in such destructive things as pornography, drugs, illicit sex, and alcohol; sometimes it comes prettily packaged through our hobbies, entertainment, and relationships. But seeking pleasure in things as innocuous as our hobbies can be just as destructive to our spiritual life as pursuing drugs. Both subtly distract us from the only one who can provide lasting joy. We must remember that the nature of pleasure is always transitory. It is gone as quickly as it comes. Please understand that I am not saying that we cannot enjoy things like hobbies or friendships; we certainly can, and God has given many of them to us as a gift, but they should not become the focus of our lives. None should take precedence over him or distract us from his sweet embrace. Those who truly seek and love God will in the end enjoy some of the pleasures of this life but will be filled because they have sought the true giver of pleasure and not just the pleasure itself.

Read 1 Kings 10:23 and Ecclesiastes 2:4-11. Where does King Solomon next seek fulfillment? Does he find it?

Have you sought fulfillment through money and possessions? As you have achieved your financial goals, have you become content or created new financial goals?

King Solomon also possesses incomparable wealth and prosperity—magnificent homes, vineyards, gardens, large flocks, and vaults overflowing with gold. He surpasses all the other kings and rulers in

his wealth. He even possesses the funds to ensure that the smallest of his whims are met. King Solomon has the best of everything, yet his wealth does not bring him joy and fulfillment.

We must divest ourselves from the illusion that money and possessions will fulfill us. They will not. Though money and possessions can appear to satisfy us, they do so only superficially. They will never satisfy us in the long run, but Satan is only too happy to dangle his enticing bait before us—a bigger house, a nicer car, furnishings for the house, stylish new clothes, the large television set, the latest technological gadget. But the things of this world only satisfy for a moment. For example, a new car is never as exciting five years after the initial purchase. And what about all those lottery winners? Most of their lives could testify to the fact that money has not brought them true joy; quite the opposite has happened. Many of them have ended up downcast and miserable. But in our minds, we discount their testimony, don't we, thinking that if we were the lottery winner, the money would make us joyful. But is that true? As we have achieved our previous financial goals, has it made us more joyful, or have we instead only created newer financial goals?

If we remain focused on money and possessions, they will end up stealing far too much of our time. We will waste countless hours, months, and years being superficially satisfied. The LORD is the only one who can ever truly satisfy us, surpassing all we could ever imagine. C. S. Lewis aptly remarked, "Aim at Heaven and you will get earth 'thrown in': aim at earth and you will get neither."⁴

Read 1 Kings 6:1-2 and Ecclesiastes 2:17-26. Where does King Solomon finally seek fulfillment? Does he find it?

Have you sought fulfillment by trying to obtain promotions and ascending the corporate ladder? What about trying to make a name for yourself at church or through volunteer activities? Explain.

King Solomon also seeks joy and fulfillment through his work and his projects. He accomplishes a great deal in his lifetime and makes a name for himself. But in the end, this does not fulfill him. Spending countless hours working late and weekends in order to reach the next rung in the corporate ladder will not satisfy us. Though power and prestige may intoxicate us for a moment, in the end they will leave us disappointed and disillusioned. On the other hand, if we allow God to remain at the heart of our work, we will enjoy him and also our work.

Seeking fulfillment through work does not only apply to secular jobs; we can also seek earthly accomplishment within the church. Ministers, for example, can be just as prone to wanting to make a name for themselves as a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. And as lay persons, we can easily succumb to the desire for power or prestige—to lead committees or have the biggest Bible study classes. Wanting to make a name for ourselves, though concealed through spiritual terms, makes our desire for power and notoriety no less acceptable. Seeking God, for any other reason than himself, is wrong.

Having studied King Solomon, does it surprise you that a person could have wisdom, power, pleasure, sexual fulfillment, prestige, and wealth and yet still not be fulfilled? Be honest. Deep in the recesses of our hearts, we believe that somehow if we had all that Solomon had, we would be joyous and fulfilled; even if we had a small portion of what he possessed, we think we would be joyous. We must not believe Satan's subtle whisperings that the things of this world will satisfy us in the long run. They will not. We can only find true joy and fulfillment in our LORD, for he has set eternity in our hearts (Ecclesiastes 3:11). Blaise Pascal said, "There is a God

shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God.” Let me stress again that the LORD has graciously given us *all* things to enjoy, like money, hobbies, and even work, but none of these can be fully enjoyed unless the LORD resides at the heart of them.

Joy remains elusive for some of us today because we continue to seek fulfillment in the temporary and passing things of this world. We long for joy and inadvertently satiate ourselves in the wrong things. In the process, our joy goes up, then down, then up again, and then down again. We must be willing to surrender our transitory pleasures for more lasting ones. Let us learn from the experiences of King Solomon and not waste countless hours pursuing a happiness that will never truly fulfill. Let us seek refuge and comfort in the arms of our loving Father.

Exercise

Update your joy journal for the past day.

Date	Event	Level of Joy (0 - joyless, 5 - joyful)
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Day 3: The Fullness of Fellowship

O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

Psalm 63:1

The depth of our joy often depends on the depth of our relationship with the LORD. The stronger our relationship with the LORD, the greater the joy we experience. Since our relationship with the LORD plays such a vital role to our joy, we will spend the rest of today and all of tomorrow assessing it.

Read Genesis 18:16-25 and James 2:23, which describe Abraham's relationship with God and answer the following questions.

How does James 2:23 describe Abraham?_____

What does it take to cultivate a friendship? _____

What does the LORD reveal to Abraham?_____

What does the LORD do for his servants (Amos 3:7)?

How does God's revelation to Abraham reveal the depth of their friendship?

In the Old Testament, Abraham possessed the notable distinction of being called the friend of God. What a wonderful title—to be known as the friend of God. Think for a moment what that title denotes—love, companionship, warmth, caring, intimacy, fellowship. They talked, they trusted, they enjoyed each other's presence. Abraham's close friendship with the LORD is evidenced by the fact that the LORD approached Abraham and shared his plan of Sodom's judgment with him. "The LORD confides in those who fear him; he makes his covenant known to them" (Psalm 25:14). And then the LORD allowed Abraham to plead on Sodom's behalf. Can you imagine the LORD coming to you and telling you of his inten-

tion to judge a whole city? This reveals the depth of fellowship that Abraham possessed with our LORD, a friendship borne of love and obedience.

According to John 15:14-15, who has God also described as his friends? How does this encourage you?

Evaluate your existing relationship with God. How well do you know and love him? Circle the word that best describes your relationship.

Acquaintance

Casual Friend

Best Friend

Is anything currently hindering you in your relationship with God?

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Excitement for other things | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of time |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Unwillingness to do God's will | <input type="checkbox"/> Known sin/disobedience |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Busyness | <input type="checkbox"/> Lack of submission |

As Christians living today, we also have the privilege of being called God's friends. "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). What an amazing privilege that the God of this universe would call us his friends! We can experience the same level and depth of friendship that Abraham experienced. Isn't that exciting? If you are not currently experiencing this type of relationship, then start with a simple prayer and ask the LORD to help you love him more. God is faithful and will help us to love him—we need only ask.

What do you learn about the Word of God in Hebrews 4:12?

What must the Word do in us (Colossians 3:16)? Why?

Are you spending time with the LORD *daily* to cultivate your friendship with him? Circle the word that best describes your time commitment to the LORD.

Sometimes

Often

Always

If you are not spending time *daily* with the LORD, then do you need to make a change?

The more we know and love God, the greater the joy that we experience. But we must be willing to make the time to know God. Though we may read a devotional occasionally and hear a sermon, we must spend time in the Word daily. Colossians 3:16 tells us to allow the Word to dwell in us richly. The word *dwell* means “to make one’s home” or “to be at home.”⁵ How at home is the Word of God in us?

As we spend time in the Word of God, we will find that it has many wonderful benefits:

- The Word guides and directs us. It is hard to successfully navigate the waters of this life without the Word of God to guide us. It illuminates our path (Proverbs 6:23).
- The Word encourages us and helps build our faith. During times of difficulty and hardship, the LORD provides much needed strength and encouragement through his Word (Psalm 119:28).
- The Word provides us wisdom and instruction. We sometimes succumb to the world’s wisdom because we are not

grounded in God's wisdom. And yet God repeatedly tells us that the world's wisdom is foolishness. In following it, we will make costly mistakes and travel down paths we should not go (Proverbs 8:10-11).

- The Word teaches and trains us in righteousness so that we are equipped to do God's work. Through the Word, God helps us to understand about sin, salvation, and eternity. He also explains the Christian walk, spiritual warfare, and how to live victoriously in him (2 Timothy 3:16-17).
- The Word helps us to discern right from wrong and truth from falsehood. As we better understand the difference between right and wrong, we can make better choices.
- The Word also judges our thoughts and attitudes, correcting and rebuking us when necessary (Hebrews 4:12).

The greatest benefit of all, however, is that the Word enables us to know God and thus more fully rejoice in our Christian walk. From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible is the revelation of God to us. The LORD chose to reveal himself to us through the Bible—he did not have to tell us about himself at all but graciously chose to do so. Let's make use of this wonderful opportunity to truly know him.

Let me also caution that the Scriptures we learn must penetrate our hearts and transform us. We are not merely acquiring facts about God to be considered “learned.” We are learning about God so that to every degree we become transformed and stand in awe of the only one who is truly worthy. If all our Bible studies and quiet times do not enable us to know God more fully and thus stand more amazed in his presence, then something is terribly wrong.

Read Psalm 63:1-3. Is the LORD your joy and delight? If you need to deepen your intimacy, then ask the LORD to help you love him more.

Challenge:

Read Exodus 33:12-23. For what does Moses ask? Have you ever asked God to reveal his glory to you? What happened?

A deep relationship with the LORD does not happen over night. It takes time and energy for us to develop our relationship with the LORD. If, for example, I only talked to my husband once a week, it would greatly hinder our relationship. It is only in talking with him and spending time with him daily that our relationship grows and matures. The same holds true for our relationship with the LORD. We must be willing to invest the necessary time with our LORD. If we spend this life snacking on the LORD, listening to a few sermonettes here and there and reading a couple of devotionals, then we will miss our true feast. If we have to sacrifice other things in our lives due to our busy schedules, like shopping or watching television, then let's sacrifice them; but let us never sacrifice our sweet communion with our LORD. These are the most important and most significant times in our life.

Psalm 63:1 says, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water." These are passionate words from the psalmist, aren't they? But what about us? Are we earnestly seeking him? Do our souls thirst for him? Do we spend enough time with our LORD to stand transfixed by his beauty and amazed by his majesty? If not, then let's ask our LORD to help us love him deeply and passionately, for he is truly magnificent.

Exercise

Update your joy journal for the past day.

Date	Event	Level of Joy (0 - joyless, 5 - joyful)
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Day 4: Whole-hearted Devotion

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

Matthew 6:24

A full relationship with the LORD means that we whole-heartedly devote ourselves to him. But sometimes we flirt with the world and with the LORD, squandering our affections. We place God in our lives but leave him in the midst of a sea of other gods, like the god of work, the god of television, the god of shopping, the god of friendship. Unfortunately, these other gods subtly divide our allegiance and secretly steal our devotion. A divided allegiance will cripple our Christian walk and leave us at an elementary level of joy at best and many times not even that.

According to 1 John 2:15-17, what should we not love? Why?

What additional warnings are we given in the following verses?

James 4:4 _____

Who was Demas (Philemon 1:24), and what happened to him as a result of his love for the world (2 Timothy 4:10)?

Read Psalm 86:11-12. List anything that is currently dividing your affection for the LORD. Do you need to ask the LORD for an undivided heart to love him?

Matthew 6:24 reminds us that *no one* can serve two masters. Either we will “hate the one and love the other, or [we] will remain devoted to one and despise the other.” Though Matthew 6:24 focuses specifically on mammon, which refers to material goods and possessions, there is an underlying theme—we cannot serve two masters. For example, we cannot serve our LORD and the god of our career. We cannot serve our LORD and the god of our possessions. God wants our complete devotion.

One of Satan’s greatest techniques is not to make us hate God but rather to help us “forget” him amidst all the enticing offerings of this world. Satan keeps us oblivious to the wonders of God, and we move day to day, week to week without actively pursuing God. Slowly the weeks become months, and the months turn into years, and before we know it, we have squandered our affections. Ultimately, whatever relationship we choose to spend our time and energy on will grow and flourish. If we spend our time and energy with the LORD, then we help nurture and grow that relationship. On the other hand, if we devote our time and energy to worldly things, then we will cultivate and develop those relationships. As this happens, we will no longer crave spiritual things because our

worldly appetites will begin to take over. As we entertain these other little gods in our lives, they subtly dull our desire for our true LORD without us ever realizing it. I am sure that when Demas started out, he never believed that he would end up with a lukewarm relationship with the LORD. Paul initially considered him one of his fellow co-workers (Philemon 1:24). But in the end, Demas loved the world too much and his LORD too little (2 Timothy 4:10). What a warning for us about feeding our earthly appetites. None of us starts out by saying that we want a lukewarm relationship with our LORD, but if we do not wisely invest time with him, that is how we could end up. In the end, our choices either draw us closer to God or take us farther away.

The little gods of our life also make an awful master. For instance, if we pursue success in our career at the expense of our relationship with the LORD, we may soon find ourselves enslaved by success, placing it before the LORD and our family. Before we know it, our careers begin to consume more and more of our time. Through it all, we tell ourselves that one day we will develop our relationship with God... one day we will pursue him... one day we will taste his delights. But one day never comes because we have been blinded by the god of this world to the true things of God. We cannot allow Satan to deceive us—the offerings of this world will never bring us true freedom and joy. Only the LORD provides that. Again, we must remember that it is not that these things are inherently bad but rather that they cannot truly be enjoyed apart from God.

In our minds, we sometimes think that we can love the LORD and still love our little gods at the same time. But we are mistaken, and the price is far greater than we could ever imagine—a half-hearted, lukewarm relationship with the LORD. And a half-hearted relationship will result in half-hearted joy as we waver between highs and lows. C. S. Lewis said,

...it would seem that our LORD finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling

about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.⁶

We are far too easily pleased by the things of this world, settling for its measly scraps instead of feasting with our Master. But why thirst for that which cannot fill and hunger for that which cannot satiate (Isaiah 55:1-2)? Why not satiate ourselves in the LORD instead and find true fulfillment in him? “Taste and see that the LORD is good” (Psalm 34:8a). We must zealously guard our relationship with the LORD. Many distracters will seek to ensnare us, but nothing, not the career, not the hobby, not the material possession, this world offers us is worth even a temporary diversion—nothing.

Read Acts 19:17-20. What do these Christians do? Why?

Fill in the blanks - Philippians 3:8.

What is more, I consider _____ a
_____ compared to _____, for
whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them _____
that I may gain Christ.

Honestly assess yourself. Is there something that you will not sacrifice to the LORD, like possessions, comfort, reputation, or security?

Sometimes we possess a half-hearted relationship because we will not surrender certain aspects of our lives. In Acts 19, some Christians confess their practices of sorcery and then burn their scrolls. Do not casually pass by the next verse—the value of the scrolls is

sizable, fifty thousand drachmas. A drachma was a silver coin that was comparable to a day's wage. Thus, fifty thousand drachmas is fifty thousand days' wages for an average laborer. Can you imagine the astonishing value of what these Christians destroy? Yet these Christians do not cling to their scrolls as a keepsake or sell them for profit. They burn them because of their evilness. Every earthly possession is nothing compared to our relationship with God. "What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my LORD, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3:8). Paul considers everything that he has lost as rubbish. The Greek word translated *rubbish* is *skubalon* and means "that which is thrown to the dogs, dregs, refuse, what is thrown away as worthless. Spoken of the refuse of grain, chaff, or of a table, of slaughtered animals, of dung."⁷ Paul considers all things, not some things, not most things, but all things that he lost nothing more than dung. Is that how we view the things that we have lost in our lives—as nothing more than dung?

Someone once remarked that we must sometimes destroy that which has earthly value in order to preserve that which has eternal value. Are we willing to take such stringent measures in our relationship with the LORD? Would we destroy the scrolls, or would we compromise? In our Christian walk, are we willing to burn whatever is holding us back? We cannot turn over 95 percent of our lives to the LORD and keep the other 5 percent secret. The LORD wants all 100 percent. Let's pause for a moment and see if we are holding anything back.

- Am I willing to forsake all, including my family and friends, for Christ?
- Do I read my Bible with as much excitement and zeal as I read other publications, surf the internet, or text my friends?

- Am I spending significant time every day communing with the LORD through prayer? Is my prayer time a pleasure or a burden?
- Am I more excited about living on this earth or about eternity with my LORD?

These are hard questions. They challenge us to the core, and sometimes the answers are not what we would like. If we are honest, we all sometimes prefer television to reading our Bible or meeting up with friends to praying. And yet we cannot shy away from answering such questions. It is only in acknowledging that we are not where we would like to be that we can grow in our relationship with the LORD. God does not expect perfection from us but a willingness to turn to him for help. He will always meet us where we are. Let's ask the LORD to pierce our hearts for him and to shatter any veneers of superficiality. Then we will stand, as many have stood before us, awed by his magnificent presence.

Joy is the overflow of our relationship with the LORD. We will never have true, abundant joy if we do not know and love God passionately. We were made for something far greater than this world. Let's stop settling. Let's stop playing with the world and start loving God whole-heartedly; then we will experience a joy we could never imagine.

Exercise

Update your joy journal for the past day.

Date	Event	Level of Joy (0 - joyless, 5 - joyful)
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Day 5: Choosing Joy

No one will take away your joy.

John 16:22b

In the past few days, we have been exploring the basic nature of joy. We have discussed 1) what joy truly is, 2) how we sometimes pursue happiness instead of joy, and 3) how a deeper relationship with God allows us to deepen our joy. Now that we better understand the nature of joy, let's spend some time reflecting on our view of God's nature and on our current level of joy.

Take a few minutes and reflect on your view of God.

Do you view God as joyous? _____

Do you picture God smiling? Why or why not? _____

Do you think Jesus laughed? Explain. _____

What do you learn about God from the following Scriptures?

Psalms 104:31 _____

Isaiah 65:18-19 _____

In the parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30, what did the Master tell the two faithful servants (Matthew 25:21, 23)? Does that surprise you?

Do you think God wants you to experience joy in your life?

Ecclesiastes 8:15 _____

Sometimes we picture God as a hard and sullen task master; thus we expect the same in our lives. But God is joyous. He is not some cosmic killjoy. Do you picture him like that? Do you envision God smiling and rejoicing? God rejoices over his creation (Psalm 104:31) and over us (Isaiah 65:18-19, Zephaniah 3:17). In the parable of the talents, for example, the master entrusts three of his servants with talents. Upon his return, he inspects their work. To two of them, he responds, “Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:23, NASB). Did you catch the last part of the master’s statement—“*enter into the joy of your master.*” The master has great joy and the master represents our LORD.

When Jesus walked this earth, I do not think that he spent every moment in rigid stoicism. He laughed, he fellowshiped, he enjoyed life. Many of the Jewish ritual offerings and feasts were meant to be joyful celebrations as the people remembered their great blessings. The LORD wants us also to remain joyful, to delight in our families, to celebrate our salvation, and to rejoice in fellowshiping with others. “This is the day the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (Psalm 118:24).

Earlier in the week, you were asked to maintain a joy journal to help you better determine what is affecting your joy. Please take a few minutes now and update your journal.

Exercise

Date	Event	Level of Joy (0 - joyless, 5 - joyful)
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____

Now that you have updated your journal, let's reflect on your joy level for the whole week. Please use your daily joy journal to answer the following questions.

What type of events tended to increase your joy?

Did certain events decrease your joy? If so, describe them.

Did you notice any triggers, like being at the end of the day, work, kids' tantrums?

Did your joy tend to fluctuate with the circumstances in your life?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If your "joy" fluctuated with the circumstances in your life, then was your joy dependent on the LORD or on your circumstances? Is this real joy?

If you are like most of us, then you probably discovered that your joy was haphazard and inconsistent. It probably depended on the different circumstances that you encountered during the week. If most of the week progressed well, then you probably experienced a high level of joy. On the other hand, if circumstances seemed depressing and overwhelming, your joy level probably declined. So is this real joy? No. Real joy, true joy, should be consistent in our lives, independent of the various circumstances that we face. Since true joy comes from our LORD, we should be able to experience joy

no matter the turmoil around us. So, for example, we can lose our job and yet still remain joyful. We can spend long hours in traffic and not get frustrated. We can do household chores and keep a joyous attitude. If we are honest, however, many of us experience a yo-yo or rollercoaster joy, up one moment and down the next.

Several years ago, as I was experiencing periods of joylessness, the LORD slowly revealed to me that my joy was not fully in him but rather in the circumstances around me. When circumstances went well, I experienced happiness; when circumstances went badly, I experienced misery. Slowly over time, I have learned to keep my focus more on the LORD and less on my circumstances so that I can now experience a more consistent level of joy. If you are experiencing a yo-yo or rollercoaster joy, spend some time with the LORD and determine the real cause. Could it be that you have sought joy in circumstances and in people instead of in the LORD and his fellowship?

Can anyone take our joy from us (John 16:22b)?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Read John 10:10. What does the thief come to do? Mark those that apply.

☐ Steal ☐ Kill ☐ Destroy

According to John 10:10b, what does Jesus offer us?

I have come that they may have _____, and have it to _____.

Can you think of some ways that Satan seeks to steal your joy?

Let me reiterate again that the LORD's great desire for us is to experience joy—abundant, lasting, inexpressible joy. If we are experienc-

ing anything less than this, we are living below our great calling. Though the Christian walk certainly has challenges and obstacles, the LORD sufficiently enables us to bear anything that comes our way and more importantly provides us a deep-seated joy, even during the worst of hardships or persecution. That is what makes Christian joy supernatural. Let's not look to the world or even to other Christians and assume such joy is unattainable—it is. Thousands of Christians over the years can testify that joy is not only attainable but is easily accessible, even in the face of great adversity.

As much as the LORD desires for us to experience consistent joy in our lives, so Satan seeks to steal it. He will do anything he can to destroy our joy. He will whisper sweet nothings in our ears and incite bitterness, worry, envy, and a whole host of other things in us. He will try to discourage and dishearten us. He will try to make us forget our LORD.

John 16:22 reminds us that no one can take our joy from us. We choose whether we relinquish it because of a situation, person, or sin or whether we cultivate and nurture it. We choose whether we allow our circumstances, our very temporary circumstances, to determine our level of joy. We do not want to merely endure this life; we want to triumph in it. So let us choose joy and live up to our great calling. “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13).