

## Return to Joy

### Put Down the Device and Experience Life to the Full

*“I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart.”*

- George William Cooke

There she stood once again. In the corner, thumb in mouth, big blue eyes filled with a mixture of fear and suspicion, scanning the room. Every week, my daughter Sophia would cry and extend her pleading arms for us when we dropped her off at the church’s nursery. My husband and I would sit through the service with the numbered wooden clothespin attached to my purse strap, looking anxiously at the screen where the red numbers would flash on and off. A flashing number meant a child had become inconsolable and their caretaker needed to return to the nursery. If your clothespin number matched the number in the box *Come on down! You’re the next contestant on “Your Baby’s Not Alright.”*

When she was little, we were summoned a lot. But as she grew, our number didn’t show up as often. However, my daughter’s countenance at pick-up time remained the same as drop-off—that of a wide-eyed spectator waiting for us to remove her from her corner box seat to the chaotic environment of screaming and playing children.

This wasn’t just her demeanor at the nursery on Sundays. Save for the few times and spaces where she felt extreme comfort, like our home and the homes of family and close friends, this was who she was as a young child. In every room we entered, she was a quiet observer who preferred to enter behind her father’s and my legs, peeking out at the world from this place of security. If she was comfortable with you, she would run into your arms and talk a mile a minute about everything under the sun. But if she wasn’t, skeptical observation was her stance.

Because I knew this about Sophia, I was nervous when I received word that the children would be performing songs for the service on Palm Sunday. We were told the children had rehearsed the lyrics in class and were prepared. However, the image my mind conjured was of Sophia standing in a corner, thumb in mouth, looking at us as we looked at her, apprehension in her eyes.

I thought that as long as she could make it down the aisle and stand there without crying, then I would call that a win. Plus, we had Kylie on our side—Sophia’s very best friend in the world would be there with her, and I knew that would calm Sophia’s anxious heart.

The morning of Palm Sunday arrived. I sat with sweaty palms waiting for the children to enter the room. One by one, the kids filed in. Where was Sophia? Had she backed out? I didn’t see Kylie either. Finally, there they were, bringing up the rear, hand in hand, with Kylie leading the way and Sophia in her yellow gingham dress, one small step behind.

She made her way to the bottom stair, stopped, and turned to face us. She scanned the room, and we locked eyes. I smiled and waved.

*She did it.* I was so proud.

The music began and the children started to sing.

Then, the most unexpected thing happened. Sophia crinkled her blue eyes and smiled big—bigger and bigger until her smile spread across the expanse of her face—then opened her mouth wide, and the words came pouring out.

All the children stood looking ahead and sang the practiced lyrics. But not Sophia. She danced. She twirled and spun. Her hands moved wildly around her head. She moved down the stairs through the aisle. Her hips were shaking. Her legs were flying. Her pale yellow and white checkered skirt and blonde hair were lifted into the sky from the intensity of her spins. Then, the other children moved too.

I didn't know what to do. This was so unlike her. *Do I grab her? Do I let this go? I'm pretty sure this is supposed to be a nice and orderly children's choir performance, but she is far from orderly in this moment.*

I stood, not knowing what to do until the Holy Spirit reminded me of the lyrics from a song I had played countless times for my children: "I want to dance like David danced."<sup>1</sup>

This was pure joy. This was contagious. I could see it spreading everywhere I looked. Parents were smiling, laughing, and clapping. Kids were moving with Sophia.

My quiet, shy, thumb-sucking-in-the-corner girl who normally couldn't wait to be picked up and placed back in the safety of my arms was dancing wildly in front of everyone. She was filled with the joy of the Lord. And that joy could not be contained.

I have seen this joy before, and I know I will see it again. It is a joy that bombards our souls and wells up from the depths—a joy that comes from the Spirit within. It is more than happiness. It is deep and abiding and spreads like wildfire. It is beyond our circumstances and can even arise when it seems like joy should not be possible.

This is the joy that comes from God above.  
And when you see it, you know it's there.

But with all our distractions and all the things vying for our attention, with all the ways we consume information and entertainment to find happiness and contentment, we miss the joy. Sometimes I think we trade the soul-quenching joy of the Lord in for temporary happiness.

I know I have. Often throughout the past decade, I have found myself with shoulders hunched, eyes locked in, and fingers flying on my phone in an attempt to fill the silence, entertain my mind, catch up on the happenings of friends, and maybe find something to buy while I am at it.

While years have passed since my daughter danced in front of our church congregation and I now have a “committed relationship” with my phone that I didn’t have back then, I wonder, *If Sophia were to step outside of her comfort zone and dance today, would I miss it? Would I be looking at my device when she walked down the aisle? Would I be responding to a quick message? Would I catch all the details and forever remember the beautiful moment? Or would I be fumbling to open the photo app then watch from behind the camera lens as the scene unfolded?*

Would I miss this moment of contagious joy?  
Even more so, what am I missing today?

### **Freedom from Technology**

The rate of growth in how we receive information and the multitude of ways we communicate with one another is mind-blowing. Between YouTube, social media, smartphones, smartwatches, iPads, search engines, gaming devices, streaming networks, apps of every kind, Kindles, Life360, Be Real, texting and so much more, we are encouraged to always be on. Always be dialed in. Always be sharing. Always be connecting. Always be taking selfies wherever we may be to share with friends so they can then do the same back to us in an endless cycle of big-eyed, staring at the phone, photo sharing.

We scroll through funny cat videos, vacation photos, mouth-watering dinner pictures, and more, as the time ticks by and our fingers swipe, swipe, swipe. Only when we glance at the clock on our screens do we wonder where in the world all that time went. Then we reluctantly put down our phones to cook dinner while our thoughts wander: *Do we have enough money? Are we going on enough vacations? Is our home nice enough? Are we doing enough for our children? Do we look young enough? And why in the world does everyone else seem to have it more together than we do?*

We feel that what we have and what we are is not enough. So, we chase the fleeting happiness we find as we scroll, reinforcing those thoughts and possibly beginning to covet those things that do not belong to us. We may even find ourselves suddenly on a consuming rampage—buying new clothes, shoes, home décor, face products promising a youthful glow and wrinkle-free complexion, the latest phone or gaming system, or a cat so we can start making our own adorable videos (without stopping to think for a second about vet bills or the cost of kitty litter and wet food). By the time we are finished running up our cards and depleting our bank accounts, we hope we will feel full. We hope we will be enough. We hope we will experience joy.

These things bring us temporary satisfaction. But when that satisfaction fades, we are left with wanting more while being stripped of the joy we long to experience. And so, the cycle begins again.

Somewhere, deep inside, many of us can relate to this spiral. We can see the detriments of constantly being attached to screens. We know it’s not good for us, but it’s such a big part of our lives that we just don’t know how to stop.

Our church leaders saw the addictive tendencies of technology and the associated problems. In May of 2023, they decided it could no longer be ignored and came up with a plan for the congregation to participate in a one-month digital fast. For weeks leading up to this fast, our leaders prepped us. They explained the negative effects of being constantly plugged in to our screens: a rise in depression, anxiety, and suicide in adults, children, and teens. They provided resources and tools for us to go tech-free, including encouraging us to use our phones only for those things that were deemed necessary and letting all else go during this time.

It felt like an impossibility, but, at the same time, the thought of disconnecting was enticing. My soul longed for freedom from technology and the need to constantly be on and available. I yearned to go back to the simpler days of my childhood when I was present with nature, friends, and family—when I was bored and my parents made me go outside to find something to do because they needed me out of their hair for a minute. I had found so much joy in my imagination and creation and play. I see my children finding joy in those spaces too. When they are bored, they make up games. They get out paints and other craft supplies. They pick up new hobbies. They go outside and put sticks in the dirt. I wanted what they still had. But it seemed that I had since forgotten that this joy is there for me to grab hold of too. Even though I am older, there was still a little-me inside, yearning to be rediscovered.

Do you know this joy I am talking about? Have you felt it in nature when you walk among the trees or when your feet step into the cool water of a babbling brook? Have you experienced what it is to be bored, followed by the excitement of finding a way to pass the time? Have you built forts in the snow or tied together stems of flowers to make the most beautiful headpiece? Have you chased the waves as they retreat back to the sea and then run from them as they returned once more to kiss your feet? Have you danced wildly and spun around so many times that your head felt dizzy, and you had to sit for a moment to regain your composure?

As I thought about the joy found in those places, I wondered, *Could this fast get me back there? Could my soul know that kind of joy once more? When my feet were on the grass, my eyes took in my surroundings, and my head was lifted? When I was present, without distraction? When I felt the wind caress my cheeks and the touch of the sun warm my face?* I wasn't sure, but I wanted to try.

During the fast, I set goals and created habits to keep off my devices. The first order of business was refraining from picking up the phone immediately in the morning. Instead, I had to finish my morning routine, then I could check my texts. I silenced my notifications so that the constant dinging didn't have me reaching for my phone. Next goal? Keeping my phone out of my hand during the day. I placed it on the counter, away from where I was working, so I couldn't be distracted. Was it hard? Yes. Did I struggle? Yes. Did I slip up sometimes? Yes. But anything worth doing is hard and, friend, what I gained was so much more than the screen time I lost.

When my head was up and I was looking out, I found space. Space to be. Space to think. Space to disconnect. Space to not compulsively check messages. Space to not respond. Space to be present with my family and my God. Space to remember to return to Jesus.

I connected to the Holiest of Holies. I became more aware of the Presence of God in my life and in my days. With the distractions gone, I returned to Him more and more. And the more I returned, the more my spirit filled with the unbridled joy that comes from Him and Him alone.

My spirit danced in the most unlikely of times and spun in the most unlikely of places. I clapped more. I sang more. My eyes crinkled and a smile spread across my cheeks more. I was filled with His joy.

### **Return to Jesus**

We are so distracted looking for the next release of endorphins that I often think we forget about the great joy that is right there for us to grab hold of each day. Joy we all long to have. Joy that is available today. Now. In this very moment.

The hope for God's children is not that we would live distracted as we chase happiness, but that we would shout, lift our arms, marvel at the beauty around us, and live in a childlike manner that is often associated with true joy.

- “Let their flesh be renewed like a child's; let them be restored as in the days of their youth’—then that person can pray to God and find favor with him, they will see God's face and shout for joy; he will restore them to full well-being.”<sup>2</sup>
- “The Lord is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him.”<sup>3</sup>
- “Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy.”<sup>4</sup>
- “The whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders; where morning dawns, where evening fades, you call forth songs of joy.”<sup>5</sup>
- “Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them; let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.”<sup>6</sup>
- “Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy.”<sup>7</sup>
- “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.’”<sup>8</sup>

True joy is childlike. It is playful. It is restorative. It claps. It is jubilant. It bursts forth in song. It shouts. It leaps. It is filled with awe. It is connected to God and to life all around. It is aware of its surroundings. It is present.

Friend, our souls crave to be in the present. We want to be mindful and intentional, to be aware and active, to be “in the moment.” But we struggle in today's distracted culture. We see joy in others, and it grabs our attention. It cries out for us to take notice. We see it and think, *That. That thing she has. I want that in my life too.* Joy is unmistakable and highly contagious.

Even the most curmudgeon of people cannot help to smile when they see a squealing, joyful child clapping their hands and smiling broadly. Even the most upright churchgoer and the most rule-following parent cannot help but smile when they are in the presence of a child shaking their hips down the aisle on a Sunday morning.

True joy spreads.

It is more than happiness. It is more than a feeling. It is a gift from our God above. And it remains even in the most unlikely of times. We can be entangled in a crisis or extreme hardship and not lose our joy. The words “crisis,” “hardship,” and “joy” don’t usually go together, but this joy is supernatural. It is not contingent on our circumstances. Joy can exist despite our trials.

So, what do we do? How do we practice the rhythm of laying down our phone in a world that regularly enforces digital connectivity? How do we silence the FOMO that is telling us we don’t want to miss out on news, social feeds, updates, notifications, and more? How do we break the habit and make space in our days, free from technology, so that we can stop watching everyone else’s lives play out on the screen and instead start being more present in our own?

We set healthy boundaries with our devices by placing limits on their usage.

Did you know your phone can help you set boundaries? Yeah, I didn’t either. Turns out there are screen-time limits available with your phone. These can include a set time when your phone automatically shuts down or when certain apps are locked and unusable. You can also check with your internet provider for parental controls and features for disconnecting devices, pausing the internet, managing access to content, and scheduling times for devices to disconnect from the network.

Also, just keeping track of how much you use your phone each week can bring attention to the amount of time you are on screen and away from everything else. Many phones can help with that, too! For example, on the iPhone, you can go into Settings and check your screen-time usage to see how long you are on the phone and what apps you are using the most. You can track if your screen time goes up or down from the previous week, as well as how many times you pick up your phone in a day. Talk about a reality check!

As you step away from devices more, pay attention to how you feel. Do you find yourself thinking more? Feeling more? Engaging more? Returning to the Lord more? Do you feel more joy?

You are meant to live your life looking up and out at the world around you. You were meant to be present in your environments. You were made to live and take it all in firsthand, not through other people’s experiences. Laying down your phone and disconnecting from screens is countercultural. It may be hard at first. It will require discipline. It will require rewiring your brain to know that you aren’t missing out when you aren’t connected online, but that you are finding joy in the present instead—joy with your God and with your surroundings.

The joy of living. As it was meant to be.

### **I’ve Got the Joy, Joy, Joy**

After the digital detox, I kept many of the habits I had started because I saw the benefits. When my phone had more limits, I could hear Jesus’s invitation to return and my joy of living

increased. I hadn't realized how distracted I had been. I didn't know how much time I had spent looking down until I started to look up. When I did, I could see the sunrise, the sunset, the birds flying overhead, the clouds parting in the skies, the smiles on my children's faces, and all the other pieces of beauty that existed in my day.

I felt connected to His creation—something I hadn't felt since I was a child—and could see nature rejoice in the Lord. When my phone was down and silent, I saw the flowers bloom after a deep winter's sleep. I caught the smell of the morning air after a stormy night and watched the way the sun kissed the top of the trees as it descended back to the horizon. I realized they were created to praise and reflect the image of our God, just as I was created to do the same.

With my empty hands, I could feel the unbridled joy fill my heart more often. I could feel a deep and profound gratitude for gifts I had taken for granted so often. I could clap my hands and cheer when my kid made a basket at the game because I was looking up and not down at my texts or Facebook feed. I could jump in excitement, dance in my car, and live life in a playful, childlike manner. Like my daughter, I could be fully present and respond to the Holy Spirit in my heart. I could twirl and dance and celebrate if that is what the moment called for. I wasn't missing it. I was there.

Joy is waiting to meet with you. It is waiting to bombard your soul and erupt forth and out of you in the most unlikely of times. It is a shift in how you experience the simple things in life. Those things you once took for granted or saw as boring and mundane can be moments when the joy of the Lord warms you completely from the inside out—while you are driving in the car or drinking your coffee or working on a presentation. While you're singing in the choir, meeting a friend for coffee, or grocery shopping for a dinner you are hosting.

Silence the distractions, put down your device, and experience His joy in the everyday. As you become more present, you will become increasingly aware of the miracles that take place all around you. Let joy creep into your soul and pour out of you in contagious bursts. The more aware, thoughtful, and intentional you are with your time, the more you'll experience the Presence of God, and with it, His fullness of joy.<sup>9</sup>

Ask Him to give you a heart like a child and to fill you with His joy. Ask Him to show you where this joy resides inside you and all around you. Ask Him to help you remove the temptation to always be looking down, and to help you to take notice of the gifts all around and to be filled with gratitude for these gifts.

Ask Him and know He will be faithful to answer.

Ask Him and start to live in that fullness.

## **Rhythms of Return**

*Prayer:*

Giver of Joy,

You offer me a life of abundance, yet so often I settle for scraps. I mindlessly give up my time and energy instead of being intentional with the precious gifts you have bestowed on me.

Help me to use my time wisely, Lord.

God, setting down the tech is hard. It's so integrated into my life. Help me set healthy boundaries and make wise choices. I want your joy to erupt in my soul and spill out into all the cracks of my life. Give me strength to make changes so I can live out that joy to the full.

Help me lift my eyes and head, pull back my hunched shoulders, and stretch my neck up from the glowing rectangles so I can look out into the beauty of Your world. Remind me that I am to live and breathe and move and love.

As I learn to live in the present, may I be bombarded by Your Presence. May boredom become a catalyst for imagination, creativity, and change. May I connect in ways I forgot existed with You, with others, with the fullness of life.

May I put down my device.  
May I live with true joy.

Amen.

*Questions for Reflection:*

1. How do you feel about your screen time? Do you feel it is under control? If you find yourself scrolling on your phone for extended periods of time, how do you feel afterward? Do you notice a change in thoughts or feelings from the time when you started scrolling to when you finished?
2. When in your life have you felt unrestrained joy? What stands out to you about that time?
3. When you think of true joy, what does it mean to you?
4. What rhythms and habits with your devices can you change to help you live life more from this place of fullness with the Lord?
5. Do you remember a time in your life before you had as many devices? Spend some time envisioning that time in your life. If you've always lived with devices at your fingertips, then think of a time when you didn't have access to them for a lengthy period. Or imagine what it would be like to put down your phone and not feel the weight of the world. What comes to mind? Specifically think about that time in relation to the experience of joy. Was it easier for you to feel joy when you weren't as connected? Do you feel like all technology today is a distraction from the Lord? Sit with these questions and ask the Lord to reveal anything about how your relationship with technology may be affecting your relationship with Him.



*Invitation to Return:*

**One Minute:** Silence your phone. Lie down on the floor or get into a position that is comfortable for you. Take deep breaths. Hold your hands on your stomach and breathe from the deep place of your gut (not the shallow place of your chest). Breathe until your lungs are full and hold for the count of four. Now exhale all the air and repeat. Consider making this a breath prayer. Breathe in, “The joy of the Lord.” Breathe out, “Fills my soul.” If your mind wanders, that’s okay. These disciplines take practice and may feel very foreign at first. Start with one minute and, if you’re able, extend to five minutes.

**One Hour:** Choose one hour in your schedule to intentionally put the phone down. You may keep your phone on but use it only for emergencies. Pay attention to how you feel when your phone is away. Does it make you feel anxious? Does it bring you peace? Do you feel more joy once you disconnect?

**One Day:** Pick a day to fast from your device or certain features on your phone. Ask God to give you wisdom and discernment to show you how and what day is best to begin. Trust that He will meet you in incredible ways during this time of fasting and ask Him to show you how to return to Jesus throughout the day.

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<sup>1</sup> “Si el Espíritu de Dios,” Hymnary.org, [hymnary.org/text/si\\_el\\_espiritu\\_de\\_dios\\_mueve\\_en\\_mi](http://hymnary.org/text/si_el_espiritu_de_dios_mueve_en_mi).

<sup>2</sup> Job 33:25-26

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 28:7

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 33:3

<sup>5</sup> Psalm 65:8

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 96:12

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 98:8

<sup>8</sup> Luke 10:21

<sup>9</sup> Psalm 16:11