

JOY (AND TRUTH AND LOVE): SOME JOHANNINE AND PASTORAL REFLECTIONS

Donald Williams on a Johannine Look at Joy

Few words fall more glibly from Christian tongues than *Joy*. Yet few experiences are more profoundly central to Christian spirituality as it is presented by the New Testament, and few raise more distressing questions. How can we sort through the issues surrounding Christian Joy? Some perspective from John's epistles can help.

The Question of Joy

At the outset, we have to address some serious questions this word raises. The first is "How is Joy even possible?" It is made a question by the very essence of Christian joy. For surely Joy is, among other things, an emotion, and emotions are responses that by their very nature come and go and cannot be coerced. To force them is to destroy them; yet Christian Joy seems, well, obligatory. It is part of the fruit of the Spirit in Gal. 5:22. Must we be happy in order to be spiritual? And then the Apostle Paul goes so far as to make it a command in Phil. 4:4. "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say,

rejoice!" How can you make an emotion a commandment when our emotions are not at our command? Trying to do so is the best way to suppress and kill the emotion in question. Surely the Apostle would not create such a conundrum for us while trying to help us live the Christian life! What is going on here?

Believers with a superficial understanding of these things who try to follow these passages of Scripture without ever having asked these questions sometimes come off as infuriatingly glib. Some of our older choruses capture that glibness all too well, to the point that they are guilty of false advertising about the Christian life. "I'm happy all the time, / Got true peace of mind, / Since I found the Lord." "At the Cross, at the Cross, where I first saw the light, and the burden of my heart rolled away, / It was there by faith I received my sight" [so far, pretty good—but look what comes next], "and now I am happy all the day." Really? Seriously? All the day? Every day? How many of us who sang those words can honestly claim them as true in our lives? The implication is that if you are not happy all the day — if you are, say, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Is. 53:3) — there must be something wrong with you spiritually. Ahem. So there must be something more to Christian Joy than simply a glib and superficial lightness of spirit. It must be something different from simple happiness. But what?

Second is an even harder aspect of the question of Joy. How is it possible to have Joy amidst, not just the hassles, but all the struggles, sorrows, and pressures of life? The wrong kind of exhortation to Joy, the wrong kind of application of Paul's commandment to his readers, can simply add the burden of guilt to all the

other burdens we carry. Or it can tempt the non-believer to dismiss us as unreal. Before we speak of Christian Joy, we must face the reality of the Christian life in this fallen world in all seriousness. We had better get real about it!

What if I were now going through some of the things that people in some of the past congregations I have served as pastor have gone through at one time or another? These are all actual tragedies of life that I have personally walked through with real people. If I had seen several of my loved ones die over the last couple of years, and the ones left were fighting over the family estate with increasingly hateful bitterness, could I have Joy? If my home (a trailer) had been destroyed by a tornado and I had no insurance to replace it, could I have Joy? If my parents were in a nursing home and did not even recognize me when I went to visit them, could I have Joy? If I lived alone in precarious health, could I have Joy? If I had a young son living with his mother in another state under less-than-ideal moral influences (she was a crack-head and her boyfriends — yes, plural — were drug dealers) and the courts wouldn't let me do anything about it, could I have Joy? If I were unemployed with no prospects and an uncertain future, could I have Joy? Or what about the Apostle Paul himself? If due to the rejection of my message I was chained on the floor of a dungeon with my back raw from the scourge and I had just heard that people in a church I had planted were squabbling and bringing the Gospel into disrepute, could I have Joy? If I were in exile on a desert island like the Apostle John, separated from my home and my friends and the churches I felt called to serve, could I have Joy?

Do you want an honest answer? No, I could not! But let's rephrase the question. (Often nothing is more

important than asking a question the right way if you want to get the right answer.) *Can God give Joy* even in these circumstances? Not “Can I have Joy,” but “Can God give Joy — in these circumstances? In worse ones? In yours? Now — here is the Gospel — here is the Good News! Now the answer is yes. Unless all of Scripture is a lie, the answer is yes! But how can this be?

The Concept of Joy

Let’s begin by looking at the concept of Joy. What is it, really? In 1 Jn. 1:4, John tells us that the fullness of Joy is the ultimate goal of his whole teaching. “These things I write to you so that our Joy may be made complete.” Joy is a key word in John’s epistles, along with Truth and Love. Therefore, since he talks about them so much, we may surmise that the key to Joy may be what John has to say about Truth and Love. The first thing to understand is Truth. Truth is a rich concept in John’s mind, with several overlapping meanings.

First, Truth is that which is so. The opposite of Truth in this sense is the lie. We see this usage in 1 Jn. 1:6 and 8. If we lie, we do not practice the Truth. If we say we have no sin, we lie, and the Truth is not in us. Why? Because in fact we do have sin. In these passages Truth is a statement or a claim that corresponds to a state of affairs that actually exists; the lie is one that does not. This is the classical philosophical definition of Truth: Truth is a property of propositions such that their content conforms to and accurately reflects the way the world actually is. Truth is that which is so.

There is more to Christian Truth than factuality (but not less). Second, Truth is that which is real. In this sense, its opposite is the false, the counterfeit, the fake. In 1 Jn.

2:8, the darkness is passing away and the *true* light is already shining — that is, the light which is really light, not a false or counterfeit imitation of the light. In 1 Jn. 5:20 the Son Jesus Christ is the *true* God, i.e., the *real* God, not a false God. In this sense, Truth is an attribute not so much of a statement or proposition as of a thing. It is a thing which is really what it claims to be, not an imitation (cheap or otherwise). Truth is that which is real.

Third, Truth is that which is correct or right or straight. The opposite of Truth in this sense would be the slanted, the twisted, the erroneous. In 1 Jn. 4:6, John distinguishes the spirit of Truth from the spirit of error. Those who are faithful to correct doctrine are true; those who deviate from it are false. You have the Truth when you are right; you are in error when you are wrong. But this is more than simply making accurate versus inaccurate statements (as in the first sense, Truth as that which is so). There is a moral quality which causes one to adhere to the straight line (the spirit of Truth) or to veer off from it (the spirit of error). Ultimately the spirit of Truth is the Holy Spirit, who gives us the moral discernment and backbone required if we are to adhere to the Truth. And both of those two things, moral discernment and backbone, are required if we are to adhere to Truth in a fallen world. Truth here is that which is right.

Fourth, Truth is always practical. You *walk* in the Truth. In this sense, the opposite of Truth would be sin, evil, or hypocrisy. John is constantly talking about walking in the Truth, doing the Truth, and practicing the Truth (1 Jn. 1:6, 3:18, 2 Jn. v. 4, etc.). Truth in Scripture is never something that can remain abstract. It has to be

incarnated, it has to be lived, or it is something less than the Truth. And if we do not practice the Truth, the alternative is not simply to ignore it. If we do not live it, we will live the lie instead, and our deeds will be evil. Truth is that which is so, that which is real, and that which is right, and it is finally something that has to be lived or practiced. Truth is that which is done.

Finally, and most profoundly, Truth in Scripture is personal, in fact, a Person: it is Jesus Christ. In this sense, the opposite of Truth is Anti-Christ. All these other aspects of Truth flow from the powerful dynamic of Christ's person, the divine Reality that dwells in Him and caused John in his Gospel to call Him the **λογος** (*logos*), the Word. Truth as statement (that which is so), Truth as quality (that which is real), Truth as character (that which is straight or right), Truth as action (the practical out-working of all of these): All flow from Christ. All are expressions of the Reality which is Christ reaching into the created world. All are defined by their conformity to His dynamic character. That is why Truth can never remain abstract. A mere abstraction is something less than an expression of harmony with this One whom C. S. Lewis called the ultimate Fact and the Father of all Facthood.¹ Our job is to take Christian Truth, Christian doctrine, and put skin around it. And that is why Truth can "abide" in us (2 Jn. 1:3). It is also why, when it does abide in us, it transforms our lives. Life eternal is simply life continually renewed and transformed by the abiding and indwelling Person who is the living Truth: Jesus.

¹ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan, 1943), 158; cf. *Miracles* (New York: Touchstone, 1996), p. 121.

The second concept that is a key to John's perspective on Joy is Love. And Love turns out to be related to Truth as practice to theory. We are to walk in the Truth (2 Jn. v. 4, 3 Jn. v. 3-4). Walking in the Truth is walking with Jesus. We are to Love one another because Love is from God and is manifested in the sending of His Son, Jesus (1 Jn. 4:7-11). Loving God is loving the Son and one another, which we show by keeping the Commandments (1 Jn. 5:1-3). Truth, Love, the commandments, and the Son are so intimately related that the mention of any one of them seems to lead to all the others. 2 John opens with the Jesus Christ who is the Son in Truth and Love (v. 3), which immediately leads to walking in the Truth (v. 4) to loving one another (v. 5) which is walking according to the commandments (v. 5). In 3 John also, walking in the Truth (v. 3-4) flows seamlessly into Love for strangers (v. 6). Christ is the source of Love just as He is of Truth. He shows it by providing propitiation (1 Jn. 4:10), which involves His own perfect fulfillment of the Law. So the Christian walk is a unified and integrated package in which walking in Truth is walking in Love is walking according to the commandments, all of which are a way of saying walking with Jesus. Truth is a living Person who indwells us and abides with us, and this indwelling Truth shows itself in an outworking Love that is equally an expression of who He is.

In summary, Truth is so, is real, is straight, is good, is practical, is nothing less than Jesus, the living Word Himself. Walking in Truth is walking in Love is walking according to the commandments is walking with Jesus. Because Truth flows from the personal dynamic that is the life of Jesus Christ, indwelling Truth in the believer shows itself in outworking Love. If we have got all of

that, we are ready for a summary statement that relates those two concepts of Truth and Love to Joy. It would go something like this:

As Love is the practical outworking of indwelling Truth, so Joy is the emotional residue left behind in the psyche by the spiritual dynamic of indwelling Truth and outworking Love. Or in less technical language, you could say it is simply the positive appreciation of what it means to know Jesus and walk with Him. What are we saying? You can have that dynamic inside you whatever the circumstances in your life may be, and while real tragedy and sorrow may be your experience — certainly will be your experience at some point in your life — this dynamic is stronger than any of that and will ultimately triumph over it. You will grieve, you will hurt, you will be frustrated, you may cry out in agony. But if indwelling Truth and outworking Love are realities in your life, Joy will sustain you in those trials and will triumph in the end. Now, that's what I call Good News!

John's concept then is very much parallel with Paul's metaphor of the fruit of the Spirit. In other words, when Truth in the person of Jesus Christ indwells you through his personal representative and agent, the Holy Spirit, when it informs, transforms, redirects, and empowers your life, the result, the natural — or supernatural — fruit of this process is Love, Joy, and Peace. That helps to explain how Joy can be a commandment. One cannot obey this particular commandment *directly*, but as Joy is fruit, one can understand it as a command to cultivate the conditions in which the fruit of Joy naturally grows. If I tell you to produce eggs, in other words, you might get frustrated: "I can't lay eggs! What an unreasonable demand!" But if you thought about it a little further, you

would realize I was really telling you to raise chickens. I'm telling you to feed your chickens, to provide them with a safe chicken coop, and to check their nests every day. You can't lay eggs, but you can certainly do all of that. And if you do, eggs are the natural result.

So, then, we are to raise spiritual chickens. How? If we walk in the Truth, which means walking in Love as Christ who is Truth and Love lives in us, then we will know a deep Joy that does not have to be forced, does not depend on outward circumstances, and gives us the strength to stand in all the tragedies of life, even ones like the ones I mentioned earlier. That is what we mean when we say that happiness depends on our circumstances, but Joy does not. As Love is the practical outworking of indwelling Truth, so Joy is the emotional residue left behind in the psyche by the spiritual dynamic of indwelling Truth and outworking Love. If this is the concept of Joy, it leads us to the conditions of Joy.

The Conditions of Joy

How does Truth working through Love leave behind the track of Joy? It does it in several ways. First, the Truth is a joyful thing in itself. Good news is a joyful thing, and *this* Good News is the most joyful thing of all! What did the Angels say to the Shepherds? "Behold, we bring you good tidings of great Joy" (Lk. 2:10). And what were those tidings? That unto them was born a Savior. In other words, that "God so Loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." That is Good News indeed! What could be more joyful than that?

Second, the Truth gives us a stable place to stand amidst all the changes of life. We live in a world that has

many goodly inns but no final dwelling. If you are looking for rest and stability here, you are looking in the wrong place. The Truth tells you that and saves you from the frustration of false hope. It tells us that this life is not eternal but is a place of trial and testing — but it also tells us that another Day is coming in which we will find our ultimate fulfillment and that it will last forever. That is Good News indeed! What could be more joyful than that?

Third, Truth reorders our priorities and enables us to live by them. If the things that are unseen are eternal, then the souls of men are eternal, and people are important. Truth thus turns us outward, causing us to Love God and our neighbor rather than being preoccupied with ourselves and our troubles. Truth is also bracing and imparts strength to deal with those troubles while they last. And if we walk in the Truth, if indwelling Truth is indeed finding expression in outworking Love, then we are experiencing the fulfillment of our natures as created in the image of the God who is the source of that indwelling Truth and outworking Love. That is a dynamic that makes possible an unshakeable Joy that transcends whatever circumstances we may find ourselves in. That is Good News indeed! What could be more joyful than that?

We cannot make ourselves be joyful, but we can plant the seeds of Joy by walking in the Truth. If you want eggs, what do you do? Raise chickens. If you want joy, what do you do? Meditate on the Truth of Jesus Christ and *practice* it until indwelling Truth shows itself in outworking Love.

How then do we find this Joy amidst the trials of life? How do we raise those chickens of indwelling Truth and outworking Love to gather the eggs of Joy they leave

behind in the heart and soul? There is no formula, no quick fix, no crisis experience at the altar or any other short cut that can be the answer to that question. We must first know the Lord, the source of Truth, and be committed to Him. Then we must let His Truth saturate our minds, permeate our spirits, and inundate our hearts until our attitudes and our actions begin to take on the character of Truth. This is not just a matter of studying texts or doctrines, though of course such study is involved, is in fact indispensable. It is not less than that but more; it is a matter of living in relationship with the Christ who is the source of Truth and Love. There are no short cuts.

What are some of the Short Cuts people try? They all short-circuit the dynamic of indwelling Truth, outworking Love, and Joy left behind.

First is Denial. Do not take the short cut of denying the troubles and sorrows of life. We are tempted to do this because we feel the need to pretend that we have Joy in front of other Christians. But it is unbiblical, it is unrealistic, and it deprives us of the support of Christian brothers and sisters and ensures that we will not find real Joy. As in salvation, so in the Christian life, we must begin by admitting our need.

Second, realize that Joy is a *byproduct* of Truth and Love; therefore, it is not something you can pursue directly for itself. Missing this is another short cut that will deprive you of Joy. Because we must *walk* in the Truth, i.e., walk with Christ, we must study the Scriptures looking for the right things: not Joy itself but the Truth and Love which are the source of Joy. This is true in so many ways. Don't read the Bible looking for comfort, but rather for the God of comfort — and you will

find comfort in Him. Don't read it looking for a blessing, but for marching orders — and you will find blessing in the journey. Don't read it looking for Joy but for Truth and Love. Then we will not just mouth the Truth but walk in it; then it will begin to indwell us, and Joy will be the result.

Third is what we could call Spiritual Gluttony. We must not short-circuit the process by *taking in* the Truth but not *giving it out*, in both word and deed. You cannot have too much spiritual nourishment, but you can have too little spiritual exercise. Truth that is learned but not lived will just go to spiritual fat. It will do more harm than good. As Love is the practical outworking of indwelling Truth, so Joy is the emotional residue left behind in the psyche by spiritual dynamic of indwelling Truth and outworking Love. Speaking the Truth in Love and acting the Truth in Love are therefore essential to the process.

The Cultivation of Joy

All right, then. If we can have Joy in even the most trying circumstances because it is not dependent on them but is the byproduct of indwelling Truth and outworking Love; if we realize that it is a byproduct so that we stop trying to lay eggs and instead raise chickens; if we avoid the shortcuts of denying the sufferings and sorrows of life and the pain they cause, of making Joy our focus instead of the Lord who is the Truth that indwells us and Loves out of us; if we stop just taking in the Word without giving it out in word and deed; what then *do* we do?

We've already answered that question. Indeed, this whole essay has been the answer to it. Walk in the Truth. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. Meditate on His

person, His teachings, His goodness, His Love, His sacrifice, His resurrection, His glory. Then, out of that contemplation, out of that Truth living in you, live the life of Love. Don't just avoid breaking the Ten Commandments negatively but live them positively out of Love. Worship God. Adore His Son. Find ways of giving expression to that adoration. Think of how you can serve your neighbor by protecting, safeguarding, valuing, and nurturing his life, his property, his family, his reputation. Do it not as a duty but as a privilege, because that is what Christ in you, the hope of glory, makes you want to do. Be crucified with Christ so that you no longer live, but Christ lives in you. And the life you live in the flesh, live by faith in the Son of God, who came in the flesh and loved you and gave Himself up for you.

Live the Christian life, in other words. This is what it is! Do it, give yourself to it, throw yourself into it, with the encouragement and in the company of your brothers and sisters. Do it consistently over time so that Truth abiding in you gives birth to Love. And you will begin to discover Joy as the emotional residue left behind by the track of the spiritual dynamic of indwelling Truth and outworking Love. Share that with each other. Let it be infectious. Nothing less than this Joy produced in this way catching on in the church can be the spur to the revival we so desperately need in our day of so much discouragement and defeat.

Conclusion

Can we have Joy in the presence of death, loss, apparent futility, suffering? Yes — if we know Jesus Christ and in him the Love of God; yes, if as the Truth He indwells us and transforms us through his Spirit; yes, if

Joy is the emotional residue left behind by the track of the spiritual dynamic of indwelling Truth and outworking Love. May it work thus in us, for the glory of our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Bibliography

Joy (And Truth and Love): Some Johannine and Pastoral Reflections

Donald T. Williams

An Unexpected Journal: Joy, Fall 2022, Volume 5, Issue 3.

C.S. Lewis. *Mere Christianity*. New York: MacMillan, 1943.

----- . *Miracles*. New York: Touchstone, 1996.