SERIES 2 EPISODE 11



JOY

"Among mortals, happy man is none."

-Euripides[22]

Why is nobody happy? In his play Medea, the fifth-century B.C. Greek playwright Euripides says that you never know what's going to happen next in someone's life. It could be good; it could be terrible. So you can't really say if someone is happy until they're dead! We're helpless before the vicissitudes of fate.

Fast forward to the Stoic philosophers of the first century A.D.; they offer a kind of solution to this problem.

STOIC JOY OR CHRISTIAN JOY?

"Do you ask what is the foundation of a sound mind? It is, not to find joy in useless things. . . . We have reached the heights if we know what it is that we find joy in and if we have not placed our happiness in the control of externals."

-Seneca[23]

Seneca's Stoic solution is to not place your joy in varying circumstances. Instead, find a way to have joy regardless of circumstance.

Sometimes Christian sermons about joy sound like Seneca's solution, just repackaged with Christian language. Ever heard a preacher say that happiness is an emotion that depends on your circumstances, but joy is something constant regardless of circumstance? There's something to that idea, but it's not a specifically Christian conception of joy.

Jesus says something more–and better–about joy.

"If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."

-John 15:10-11 ESV

Jesus uses the language of union, of mutual indwelling. Joy is not just an intellectual experience; it's an indwelling of the presence of Jesus in our very being.

THREE THINGS JOY IS NOT

Joy is not . . .

- **Pleasure / "Fun Joy"**: The kind of joy Jesus is talking about, the kind of joy that's part of the fruit of the Spirit, must go deeper than mere sense experience. James writes, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds" (1:2 NIV). If suffering can somehow count as joy, we're not just talking about the feeling you get when you lick an ice cream cone.
- **Positivity / "Fake Joy"**: In some circles, there's no room for dark emotions like sadness or for honesty about mental health conditions like depression. You have to put on a plastic mask of happiness to fit in. But Paul writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15 ESV).
- **A Powerful Idea / "Flat Joy"**: In this view, joy has nothing to do with your feelings; it's about how you know that God is going to provide regardless of how you feel. While holding onto what we know about God as our feelings go up and down is important, this view reduces joy to an intellectual experience. The joy Scripture speaks of is more than an idea.

22. Euripides, The Tragedies of Euripides; Translated by Arthur S. Way, (London, 1894), Wikisource, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 14 January 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Tragedies_of_Euripides_(Way)/Medea.
23. L. Annaeus Seneca, Letter XXIII, "On the True Joy which Comes from Philosophy," Moral letters to Lucilius (Epistulae morales ad Lucilium); Translated by Richard Mott Gummere, (A Loeb Classical Library edition; volume 3 published 1925), Wikisource, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., 14 January 2025, https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_to_Lucilius/Letter_23.

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WHAT JOY IS

"Joy is not pleasure, a mere sensation, but a pervasive and constant sense of well-being."

- Dallas Willard [24]

In light of the Scriptures we've looked at, we could add to this definition, "Compatible with suffering." Joy is a pervasive and constant sense of well-being, compatible with suffering.

It's not just an idea; it's a three-dimensional experience. It's not an emotion, but it does affect our emotions over time.

"The great central terms of life in Christ are 'faith,' 'hope,' 'love,' and 'peace.' These are not just feelings; in substance, they are not feelings. They are conditions involving every part of an individual's life, including the body and the social context. They serve to equip us for the engagements of life. They do, however, have feelings that accompany them, and these positive feelings abundantly characterize those living in the presence of God."

- Dallas Willard [25]

Joy is a condition of life that's more than superficial circumstantial feelings, but it does remap our emotions landscape over time, including dark and bright emotions, deepening our conviction of God's care and his love for us.

PRACTICE TO TRY: GIVING THANKS

Joy is more than fun, but it is fun to practice joy.

On your way home from work, or when you're wrapping up at your work-from-home desk, think: What am I thankful for from today?

Gratitude is just paying attention to the presence of God in the details of our everyday life.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What have been sources of great joy for you in life?
- What kind of Christian teachings about joy or happiness have you received in the past? How have they been helpful to you (or not so helpful)?
- What's the difference between a Stoic vision of joy and a specifically Christian vision of joy?
- Have you had experiences with Pleasure ("Fun Joy"), Positivity ("Fake Joy") or a Powerful Idea ("Flat Joy")? How is the joy Jesus offers us different?
- What would it look like for you to "practice joy" this week?

24. Dallas Willard, The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 128.
25. Dallas Willard, The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 128. Emphasis original.