

Finding Joy in God's Creation

Rich Nathan
August 5 & 6, 2017
Living a Joyful Life
Genesis 1-2

I want to show you two pairs of pictures. Tell me which picture in each pair most people think of, when they think of Christianity.

American Gothic painting and a child's birthday party picture side-by-side

Pilgrim and a wedding picture side-by-side

Let me ask you a question. If you were asked what single word comes to mind when you think about the Christian faith, what word would it be? Some of you might say, "What comes to my mind is the word grace. God's unearned, unmerited favor shown to the utterly undeserving." That's a great answer! You know, the word grace appears 121 times in the New Testament. Christianity is a religion of grace.

Others of you might say, "When I think about the Christian faith, the word that comes to mind is love." As it says in John 3:16:

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The word "love" is a great answer if you were asked to come up with a single word to describe Christian faith. After all, it appears 317 times in the New Testament. But how many of you, if you were asked for a single word to describe the Christian faith as it is described in the New Testament would come up with the word "joy"? Do you know that there are 326 occurrences of the word joy or related words like exalt or celebrate in the New Testament?

The word joy is found more often in the New Testament than the word love and more often than the word grace or the word faith.

Joy is the mark of biblical Christianity

One scholar who spent his whole life studying ancient literature said this:

The New Testament is the most buoyant, exhilarating and joyful book in the world.

There is joy at the beginning of the gospel of Luke and joy at the end. When Jesus is born, an angel of the Lord appears to some shepherds in a field. Here's what we read:

Luke 2:9-11

⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

And when Jesus ascends to heaven, after his resurrection, at the very end of the Gospel of Luke, we read this:

Luke 24:51-52

⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Every single New Testament writer speaks about joy. Every one! Joy is the mark of biblical faith. Joy is a major theme in the Bible. Much of Jesus' earthly life and teaching was about joy. Listen to some of these verses:

Luke 10:21

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father..."

Or this,

John 16:22

Jesus said, "You have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you."

John 16:24

"Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete."

Those verses were from the gospels. Listen to what the Apostle Paul said.

Romans 14:17

For the Kingdom of God is...righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Philippians 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.

The Psalms in particular list dozens of calls to God's people to rejoice, to take joy in God's presence. Let me give you just one verse from the Psalms:

Psalms 118:24

This is the day, which the Lord has made: let us be glad and rejoice in it!

It doesn't say: Let us gripe and complain about the weather. Let us grumble and moan about our jobs. Rather it's, "This is the day which the Lord has made: let us be glad and rejoice in it."

Proverbs says,

Proverbs 15:30

A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news health to the bones.

Joy is not only the mark of biblical Christianity, but

Joy is the mark of a Spirit-filled Christian

I praise God for Pentecostal and charismatic Christians. Not only because this part of the church restored an emphasis on the Holy Spirit's presence and the Holy Spirit's power. I praise God for Pentecostal and charismatic movements because this part of the church restored joy in worship. You can't go to a Pentecostal or charismatic church anywhere in the majority world, much less in the United States, without immediately being struck by the difference between the worship at these churches and the worship in churches that are not Pentecostal or charismatic. People are not asleep during worship, they're not looking at their watches or counting the ceiling tiles as they go through a ritual for the 10,000th time. They're emotionally alive. They're engaged. They're celebrating. Their hands may be raised. There may be tears running down their faces. Joy is the mark of Spirit-filled Christians.

William Barclay, the great Bible commentary writer, once said,
"A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms."

The lives of a Spirit-filled Christian is marked by joy. The Apostle Paul spoke about the qualities that should be displayed in a Christian's life if we're genuinely turning control of our lives over to Jesus and asking him regularly to manage our lives. If we're filled with the Holy Spirit, joy is second only to love as the mark of a Spirit-filled Christian. Listen to what Paul says in

Galatians 5:22-23a

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control.

If joy is the mark of biblical Christianity and if joy is the mark of a Spirit-filled Christian, if a gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms, the question that I want to tackle over the

next month is “How do you and I find joy?” Where do we find joy, especially in hard times, in personal suffering, in a world that is filled with suffering? I’m not going to speak this month about happy-clappy religion. I’m not going to be talking about becoming one of those silly, empty-headed Christians who just glosses over all the pain, all the challenges, all the tragedies of life, one of those silly Christians who seems to be radically out of touch with injustice, with sickness, with the hard questions of why did God allow such-and-such to happen. That’s not what I’ll be talking about this month when I talk about joy.

Instead, I want to talk about the joy that is available to the thinking person, the person who is in touch with suffering, the person who may be going through a really hard time. I want to talk about the joy that’s available whatever difficulty you are going through, whatever situation in life you might find yourself in. Wherever you work – whether it’s in the oncology ward at OSU or Riverside in a rehab clinic, if you are a police officer regularly facing the dark side of life or if you’re caring for someone with dementia, if your spouse or child is ill. Where can you find the joy?

Over this next month, we’re going to trace the theme of joy through the Bible. We’re going to follow the theme of joy in the order that the biblical narrative sets it out. In this first message today, I’m going to talk about “Finding Joy in God’s Creation”.

Let’s pray.

You say, “Rich, what is joy? What are you thinking about when you use the word joy?”

One thing I mean is that joy is the emotional response we have to something good. When we experience something good, the normal, healthy emotional response we should have is joy. Joy because we witness a wedding between two wonderfully matched people. Joy at getting back together with an old friend that we’ve missed for years. Joy over good choices that our children have made that have resulted in success. Joy at having a baby. Joy in your team winning.

Now, the ultimate source of all good things and of all goodness is God.

James 1:17

¹⁷ Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

There’s nothing good in the world that didn’t start first from the open and generous hand of God. If we trace through the biblical narrative regarding goodness, the biblical story starts with creation. The Bible begins with these words:

Genesis 1:1

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

So, we can say that:

Joy is our response to God's goodness in creation

The Bible begins with God's good creation and the Bible ends with this final vision:

Revelation 21:1

Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth," for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

Creation begins in a garden and often God cleanses the world of all sin and renews creation, creation ends again in a garden.

The reason why so many Christians lack joy, the reason why so many Christians find it hard to be joyful is that Christians act as if the Bible begins with Genesis 3, a story of sin and tragedy and fallen-ness, and we imagine it ends with Revelation 20, a story of God's judgment. Part of the reason why Christians are so gloomy, part of the reason why it is so common to meet joyless Christians is that many of us Christians have neglected to really embrace a major theme of the Bible as we look at life – the doctrine of creation.

God created the world and made everything good. And the Lord is coming back, not to destroy the world. The Lord is coming back to free the world from sin and suffering and sickness and sorrow. No more disease, no more distress, no more disappointment, no more death.

God made creation good! This is the point made over and over again in Genesis 1. Six times in Genesis 1, God declares his work to be good. For example, we read:

Genesis 1:4

⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.

And in verse 10:

Genesis 1:10

¹⁰ God called the dry ground "land," and the gathered waters he called "seas." And God saw that it was good.

Six times in Genesis 1, God declares that the work of his hands is good.

Chris Wright, a great Old Testament scholar, portrays God in Genesis 1 as being like a Master Chef. Wright says this:

“Like a master chef bringing a multi-course banquet before admiring guests, God kisses his fingers with each new delicacy that he brings from his creative workshop, until after the *piece de resistance*, in a seventh and final verdict on the whole achievement God declares it all “very good”.”

Picture God just kissing his fingers. “This is good! Ah, this is good! You’re going to love this! I just made the animals, there are the fish and the birds and the plants and the trees! And, now, I’m bringing out something extra-special. The crown of all creation – human beings.” God looks over all of it and kisses his fingers again in Genesis 1:31.

Genesis 1:31

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Creation calls to mind a wonderful meal, a banquet. In creation we see a display of the most awesome, creative artist in the universe. It is good. Six times – it is good. And the seventh time – it’s very good. Creation is good, not because creation is useful to us – we can mine the iron and the copper, dig out the coal and oil. Creation is good because God declares it so. Creation is intrinsically good.

You know, the biblical story of creation offers an incredible alternative to the other two great stories about nature offered by the world today. What are the great stories, the great narratives, that people believe about nature today? On the spiritual left, we have people who worship creation as divine. Many, many people in the West are turning back to nature worship. The celebration of a pagan spirituality, Gaia philosophy. On the spiritual left and in some environmental circles, you see star worship and tree worship and nature worship growing. Shamanism is growing. We see the divinizing of nature, nature as God.

The other great alternative, the other way that people in the world see nature is found on the secular right. Folks on the secular right view the earth as nothing other than resources to be exploited by people. If we can make a buck by drilling for oil in the Grand Canyon, let’s drill, baby, drill! Let’s cut down the redwoods and build a waterslide. Let’s knock the tops off of mountains, let the sludge run down to the local rivers and streams and use the coal to power massive lighting displays of dancing girls on the Las Vegas strip.

The Bible and biblically thoughtful Christians can offer an incredible third way between divinizing creation on the one hand as if it were God and destroying creation on the other as if its only purpose was financial gain for us. The Bible tells us that:

All of creation is a pointer to God

This is the great Christian alternative to the stories of the spiritual left and the secular right. Because God made creation, all of creation points ahead of itself to God.

Psalm 19:1-4a

- ¹ The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands.
² Day after day they pour forth speech;
night after night they reveal knowledge.
³ They have no speech, they use no words;
no sound is heard from them.
⁴ Yet their voice goes out into all the earth,
their words to the ends of the world.

Martin Luther, the father of the Protestant Reformation, said:

“The power of God is present at all places, even in the tiniest leaf... God is currently and personally present in the wilderness, in the garden, and in the fields.”

Nature is a pointer to God. Nature is not God, but it points ahead of itself to God. Have you ever noticed how often Jesus uses something from the natural world to illuminate the truth about God and his Kingdom? Jesus talks about the birds of the air. He talks about the lilies of the field. Jesus talks about seeds being sown and seeds growing secretly. Jesus talks about sheep and lambs and goats and trees and fish. He’s saying, “Don’t you get it? All of creation is meant to point ahead of itself to God.

A few weeks ago, Marlene, Naomi and I went on vacation with my son, Daniel, and his family to visit a few national parks in the southwest.

I dare you to stand on the rim of the Grand Canyon and not think of God. Not only is all creation supposed to be a pointer to God, but

All creation rejoices in God

Psalm 96:11-13

- ¹¹ Let the heavens rejoice, let the earth be glad;
let the sea resound, and all that is in it.
¹² Let the fields be jubilant, and everything in them;
let all the trees of the forest sing for joy.
¹³ Let all creation rejoice before the LORD, for he comes,
he comes to judge the earth.
He will judge the world in righteousness
and the peoples in his faithfulness.

Psalm 148:3-10

- ³ Praise him, sun and moon;
praise him, all you shining stars.
⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens
and you waters above the skies.
⁵ Let them praise the name of the LORD,
for at his command they were created,
⁶ and he established them for ever and ever—
he issued a decree that will never pass away.
⁷ Praise the LORD from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all ocean depths,
⁸ lightning and hail, snow and clouds,
stormy winds that do his bidding,
⁹ you mountains and all hills,
fruit trees and all cedars,
¹⁰ wild animals and all cattle,
small creatures and flying birds,

The book of Psalms ends with this command:

Psalm 150:6

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD.

Have you ever thought about this? Those of you who have read through the Bible and read through the Psalms? Does it fill you with wonder that all creation, not just human creation, all creation – animate, inanimate, everything that God made – rejoices in God’s goodness. Everything is created to rejoice in and praise the Lord.

I want you to watch this video of elephants running to rejoice in the birth in a little elephant calf.

Here is one secret for finding joy even in difficulty, even in hard times, even in sickness, even where there’s injustice and tragedy. Below all of these terrible things in the world, is God’s goodness is still found in creation. One way to find joy in this broken and fallen world is to respond to God’s goodness in creation. You say, “How do I do that, Rich? How do I respond in joy to God’s goodness in creation?” Use the five senses that God gave you. Hearing, seeing, tasting, smelling, touching.

Take a walk in a park or on a bike trail and use your ears to listen to the sounds around you. As you are quiet, what do you hear in the park, on the bike trail? Listen to the chirping of a bird or the chirps of crickets, to the wind, to children playing, to music, to

water moving over rocks or waves breaking on the shore. How do your ears help you to take in creation and respond to God's goodness in creation?

With our eyes we can look out over God's good creation wherever we might be in the natural world. Stop and look, drink it in. Take some time to not just gobble down your food as if you're in a race, take some time to really taste your food. Taste and savor a juicy plum. Let it explode in your mouth. When you eat freshly picked corn on the cob slathered in butter or you eat pie a la mode, fresh apple pie right out of the oven with wonderful creamy vanilla ice cream on top. Taste that pie a la mode and rejoice as it points you to God. Rub your hand over your pet. Stroke the back of your cat or your dog. Feel some silk. Put your cheek next to the cheek of a baby – let your senses fill you with joy at God's good creation.

Joy is our response to God's goodness in creation. Here's the last thing:

Joy is the result of fulfilling God's creation-mandate

Here's what we read in:

Genesis 2:15

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

God says to the first man and, by extension, to all of humanity that we are put in this world to do two things – to cultivate the world and take care of it. If we do these things, God says we will experience joy. Let me tackle the two things in reverse order.

God says to you and me, "I own the world. I own all of creation – every tree, every mountain, every stream and river, lake and ocean. I own it all. I am entrusting you to take care of my good creation."

How should a Christian relate to the earth, to nature, to water, to the air, to the land, to the trees, to the animals that God made? How should we relate to God's good creation? God says, "Take care of what I made." What does that mean? Imagine that you were homeless and a very wealthy, generous person said to you, "I've got a guest house on my property. You can live in my guest house as long as you want for free so long as you take care of it."

Now, imagine after you've been living in this guest house for a while you realize that you're not seeing the owner around very much. You don't know where the owner is, and you never see him around. The owner doesn't seem to be checking up on you to see how you're taking care of the guest house. Over a period of time, you begin to think, "You know, the guest house really is mine. I own it. I'm going to have my friends

over to party.” So your friends come over and some of them get drunk. They bust out some of the windows in the guest house. The lawn is strewn with broken beer bottles. Holes are punched in the walls. Someone falls through the screen door, totally pulling it off its hinges. Someone carves their name in the beautiful wood in the den. The rugs are all ruined. Maybe someone starts the fire in the guest bedroom and fills the house with smoke. How do you think the owner of the estate would feel when he comes back to check on the condition of his house?

God said, “Take care of my creation. Don’t destroy the world I’ve given you. I’m coming back and I’m going to see how you did at fulfilling my mandate to take care of the creation that I own.”

Now, Genesis 2:15 not only tells human beings to take care of creation, here’s what we read:

Genesis 2:15

The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

God didn’t put our first parents in the garden and say to them, “Children, here’s a wonderful world here for you to enjoy. Just don’t break anything. Keep everything exactly as it was.” God created a beautiful world and then he put people into the world, and he says to them, “I want you to improve on the world I made. I want you to work it and make the world better.”

You say, “How can a human being improve on the perfection that was found in the Garden of Eden?” Well, human beings said, “You know what would be really great in this garden? What if we planted some of those roses over here? What if we built a trellis so that the roses would climb over the trellis? We could have an arch of roses. What if we put the geraniums over there? What if I made a little bath and birds could come and splash in the little bath? I could get around the garden more easily by mining some of the iron ore that exists in God’s hills. And I could turn some of that metal into automobiles or into a musical instrument that I could play at night. What if I learned how to grow more wheat? Or I figured out what to do with the wool that’s on these sheep – I bet I could make a sweater or some socks.

Take care of God’s creation, God says. You must also work it, improve on it, cultivate it. And in this work you will find joy. Joy is the result of fulfilling God’s creation-mandate.

Here’s what we read in:

Ecclesiastes 3:12-13

¹² I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live. ¹³ That each of them may eat and drink, and find satisfaction in all their toil—this is the gift of God.

What do these verses mean for you and me? Take time, not only to savor God's good creation through the five senses – your ears, your eyes, your taste, smell and touch – but take time to savor the work of your hands, what you have accomplished by God's grace. This will bring you joy!

My wife, Marlene, said to me the other day, "You know, I really love to clean up the kitchen at the end of the evening. It's not just a terrible chore, I love to clean it up. There's something really satisfying for me about bringing order out of disorder." There's joy in the work of our hands. I like to step back after I've mowed the grass and trimmed everything up. I like the feeling of looking out at my yard and saying, "You know, this looks pretty good."

I love the feeling I get from digging into the Bible and looking at different verses in a fresh way. I love preparing a message and then delivering it on the weekend. People respond and learn something more about God, about how wonderful God is and how he has designed life to be so much better than most of us experience.

In your particular tasks, do you ever take time to savor the work of your hands when you've done a job and done it well? Whether you're being paid for the work or not, whether it's work for your family or work for yourself as a single person, preparing a meal, volunteer work, ministry, something you accomplish in your career. You say, "Where do I find joy? The world is so full of sadness." Joy is our response to God's good creation. And joy is also the result of us taking care of God's good creation and improving on it.

Let's pray.

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Genesis 1-2

- I. Joy is the mark of biblical Christianity
- II. Joy is the mark of a Spirit-filled Christian
- III. Joy is our response to God's goodness in Creation
 - a. All creation is a pointer to God
 - b. All creation rejoices in God
- IV. Joy is the result of fulfilling God's creation-mandate