

Finding Joy while We Wait

Rich Nathan
August 19 & 20, 2017
Living a Joyful Life
John 16:16-24

Do you know anyone who likes to wait? Think about your most recent experience of waiting. Waiting for a ridiculously slow red light to finally turn green; waiting for a dumb driver who is insisting on obeying the speed limit to get out of your way so that you can make an appointment.

Wait? I don't want to wait. I've been waiting in my air conditioned car outside of Starbucks listening to music for at least two whole minutes while I'm waiting for my non-fat, no whip, caramel macchiato to be served up. What's the barista's problem? I want my drink and I want it now! I want to get out of here.

Research on the internet habits of Americans tells us that if a page takes longer than a second to load, one second, many Americans will have clicked elsewhere. Amazon calculated that a page load slowdown of just one second costs them nearly \$2 billion per year. 40% of Americans give up on accessing a mobile shopping site that won't load in less than three seconds.

How many of you get angry at Netflix because you have to stare at that stupid red screen for 3-4 seconds while your two and a half hour movie buffers in order to download so you can watch it while you sit on your sofa? "I cannot believe how long it's taking for this movie to download. I thought we paid for high speed to our internet provider! This is crazy!"

There was a book out written a decade ago called *Faster: The Acceleration of Just about Everything* by James Gleick.

He has really interesting examples about how everything in contemporary society has accelerated. Do you know that they even have one minute bedtime stories for busy parents? You can literally complete the entire bedtime story for your child in one minute. The story of the Three Bears? We've got only one bear – the baby bear. Hansel and Gretel? We don't need Hansel – just Gretel. Forget the seven dwarves! The prince finds Snow White, he kisses her, she wakes up, and they get married and live happily ever after. The end. And while we're saving time on reading stories to our kids, we can use that time waiting for Netflix to load up one of our movies.

Over the past few weeks, I've been doing a series on Joy. I have commented on several occasions that

Joy = THE mark of a Spirit-filled Christian.

I've mentioned to you what William Barclay, the famous Bible commentator said:

A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms.

Joy is a major theme in the Bible. There are hundreds of verses in the Bible devoted to joy. You know, everywhere you go these days – restaurants and bars – advertise Happy Hours. You go in and look at the people sitting at the bar, and I notice something about them. They don't seem very happy! How many of us would be surprised if churches began to advertise their service times as "Happy Hours"?

Here at Vineyard Columbus, we have a Happy Hour at 6:00pm on Saturday night. 9:00 and 11:30am on Sundays at our Cooper Road campus. Check out our website for Happy Hours at our other campuses. That's way closer to the truth.

Sonja Lyubomirsky is one of the best known happiness researchers in the world. Here's what she wrote:

I don't have a religious or spiritual bone in my body. But the studies clearly show that religious people are happier.

Her advice:

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If you're unhappy by all means practice religion!

Today, as we continue the series on joy, I want to bring together two subjects that we think could not be brought together – waiting and joy. I've called today's message, "Finding Joy while We Wait."

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¹⁶ Jesus went on to say, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."

¹⁷ At this, some of his disciples said to one another, "What does he mean by saying, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me,' and 'Because I am going to the Father'?" ¹⁸ They kept asking, "What does he mean by 'a little while'? We don't understand what he is saying."

¹⁹ Jesus saw that they wanted to ask him about this, so he said to them, "Are you asking one another what I meant when I said, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me'?" ²⁰ Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. ²¹ A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is

born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. ²² So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy. ²³ In that day you will no longer ask me anything. Very truly I tell you, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. ²⁴ Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.

Seven times in four verses the Apostle John mentions the term “little while”

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The “little whiles” of life

What does Jesus mean when he says in verse 16:

Slide John 16:16

¹⁶ Jesus went on to say, “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.”

What’s he talking about “In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me?” Well, in the immediate context, it almost certainly is the case that Jesus is talking about the period of time between his death on the cross and his resurrection. He’s saying, “I’m going to be taken from you in a little while, and then after a little while I will be restored to you.”

But there are at least two other plausible explanations for the “little whiles”. The second explanation that some commentators have for this phrase is that the “little while” is the time between Jesus’ ascension and his sending of the Holy Spirit. You remember that Jesus ascended into heaven 40 days after his resurrection and then the disciples waited in the Upper Room – 10 more days. On the day of Pentecost – the 50th day after Easter, Jesus, from heaven, sent the Holy Spirit. In a little while you won’t see me, but then in a little while I will come to you by the Holy Spirit. That’s the second possible explanation.

The third possible explanation is one that has a long tradition in the history of the church. Augustine, way back in the fifth century, explained that the “little while” is the time between the ascension of Jesus and his second coming. What did Jesus mean by the “little while”? In a little while you won’t see me and then in a little while you will see me. I believe that all three – the time between the crucifixion and the resurrection; the time between Jesus’ ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit; and the time between Jesus’ ascension and the second coming – are all plausible explanations of Jesus’ statement.

Clearly, whatever view you take on the meaning of the “little while” in verses 16-19, whether it’s the “little while” between Jesus’ crucifixion and the resurrection; or the “little while” between Jesus’ ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit; or the “little

while” between Jesus’ ascension and the second coming, “little whiles” in life require waiting.

You know, in the Bible, we see God regularly making people wait.

Waiting and God’s people

God’s timetable is obviously different than our timetable. We think in terms of seconds, God thinks in terms of decades and centuries. Everywhere in the Bible, it is clear that God keeps people waiting and God will not be rushed. For example, Father Abraham is 75 years old when God promises him a child in

Genesis 12:4, 7

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.

⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

But God did not give Abraham a son immediately. Instead he made Abraham wait 25 more years before he fulfilled the promise.

Or I think of God’s treatment of Moses. Moses waited in the desert, in the wilderness. The old King James version talked about being the “back side” of the desert for 40 years before God appeared to him in a burning bush. Even after God appears to Moses and tells Moses that he is going to be the deliverer of the Children of Israel, think about how excruciatingly difficult it must have been for Moses to wait through the 10 plagues. There’s nothing in the Bible that tells us that God told Moses, “Listen, I’m sending you to Pharaoh and you’re going to bring 10 plagues down on him and after – and only after – all 10 plagues will I deliver the Israelites from Egyptian slavery.” Rather, Moses announces one plague and Pharaoh doesn’t respond, then a second plague and no response, a third plague and so on.

I think this has a huge application to us. We see God do something amazing and we think, “This is it! This is the moment that everything is going to turn around.” And it doesn’t. We struggle with waiting on God. How many folks have felt that they’ve been called by God to do a particular task or to be involved in a particular ministry, to make a difference in the world in a particular way? And because we received a calling and have been obedient to that calling we assume doors will just fly open and we’ll experience immediate success. We get to the door and it’s closed. Or we walk through an open door and instead of experiencing success we experience failure and then another failure and another failure. Lord, was that you?

How much clearer could a calling be than a burning bush? The Lord spoke audibly and sent Moses repeatedly back to Pharaoh. And yet, nothing happened for months. Moses

must have wondered, “Lord, is this you? What’s going on here?” In the Bible and in life, God frequently has people wait. God made the Children of Israel wait for 400 years in Egypt before he took them to the Promised Land. The nation of Israel had to wait for thousands of years before their long-promised Messiah came.

We followers of Jesus have been waiting and waiting for centuries for the return of Jesus the Messiah. We wait for our resurrection bodies. We wait for the restoration of this earth. We wait for healing for ourselves and for loved ones. Christians are taught to wait to meet another follower of Jesus to date them. Christians are told to wait until marriage before we have sex. Christians are told to wait until marriage to have children. We’re told to wait.

Why does God make his people wait?

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Waiting and God methods

Now, I have a fundamental assumption about life that has grown out of more than four decades of Bible study and more than four decades of leading and caring for people in the church. My fundamental assumption about life drawn from the Bible is that there are two primary methods that God uses to change us into the image of his son, Jesus. God is always in the business of reshaping us, reforming us, transforming us, changing us. God is always in the business of trying to get us to grow up before we grow old! The two primary methods that God uses to reform and reshape us are pain and waiting.

If you ask a person, “When did you make the turnaround in your life? When did you decide to really turn to God? When did you make the decision to truly surrender your life to Jesus without reservation? When did you get serious about your faith?” Most of the answers will be around the twin themes of pain and waiting.

When we are in pain, when we are waiting, we’re forced to acknowledge that we are not in control of our destinies. There is so much in life that is beyond our control. When we’re in pain, when we’re waiting, we’re forced to acknowledge our limitations. We’re forced to recognize that there is so much in life that we can’t produce. There are so many questions that we can’t answer. It’s during times of pain and waiting that God pries our hand open from the death grip we have on having to control everything. It’s during times of pain and waiting that God pries our hand open on some addiction that we’ve clung to, some lie about ourselves or our life that we’ve always wanted to believe. It’s during times of pain and waiting that we finally give up and reach out to God for salvation, for wisdom, for help. Have you ever been brought to that point, friend? Would you say this is true of you? It was during a season of pain, during a time of waiting that I really met God.

There are two situations that come to mind when we're waiting for God. The first is when we're waiting for God to answer our prayers.

Waiting and God's answers

One of the most frustrating places for us in our relationship with God in an instant society is that God forces us to wait for answers to prayer. We say to God: God, answer this prayer for healing and heal right this moment. God, answer this prayer for a job and make this interview the one that opens all the doors. We say: God, my teenager is going away to a Christian camp this weekend. Have this weekend be the weekend that my teenager has the big turnaround in their life. Let me see the salvation of my loved one during this particular crisis in their lives.

God makes us wait. And during this waiting time, God asks questions of you and me. Questions that we can't hear, except when we are forced to wait. God speaks to our spirits and says to us: Will you continually accuse me of not caring about you? Or not caring about your loved one? Will you continually accuse me of not being good or intending good? Will you constantly accuse me of playing games with you, promising and not delivering? Will you always accuse me of not knowing what is best for you, for this other person, for the world?

During times of waiting, God speaks to our souls and says: Will you trust me? During times of waiting, God speaks to us and says: Will you always prescribe to me the method and the timing by which I must answer your prayer?

The second place we have to wait is when we're waiting for God's deliverance.

Waiting and God's deliverance

In our instant society, we spend years pounding addictions into our life and then we say to God: God, I'm ready for change; change me today. Pastors and counselors hear this all the time. "I don't know why God has not seen fit to immediately deliver me from my desire for alcohol, or the temptations I face regarding drugs, sex, or my sexual orientation, or my eating disorder. I don't know why God has been holding back on me when I have spent decades forging a certain character. Why have I not been delivered today?"

Friend, have you ever been frustrated with God because your growth is simply too slow? Pastors and Christian counselors hear this all the time, not only about individual growth, but also about marital change. I can't tell you how many people I have talked with over the years about their marriages who say: Well, we tried Christian counseling, but it didn't work for us. Really? You have spent 25 years forging incredibly destructive marital habits, fighting with one another like cats and dogs. You are carrying around

truck-loads of grudges towards your mate, and it wasn't fixed in one counseling session? Well, clearly marital counseling is not the answer for you!

Churches like ours – who believe in and pray for healing and deliverance – need to couple the message of healing and deliverance with a strong caution that most Christian growth does not occur by the instant zap method. Most Christian growth is the result of a process where people intentionally commit themselves to the hard work of relying on God's grace and strength to help them change attitudes – through prayer, through fellowship – or change behaviors. Christian growth is like the accumulation of wealth or weight loss. There are no easy one-step methods. That's why I appreciate organizations like AA. At least they are honest about the fact that there are going to be 12 difficult steps. And that change is probably not going to happen alone. It is going to happen in community. That kind of mindset needs to be adopted for every follower of Jesus at the Vineyard.

The interesting thing about waiting in the Bible is that the Bible links together things that we would never link together. The Bible brings together things that we would always keep apart. Like what? Joy and trials. Joy and difficulties. Joy and waiting.

If someone said, "We're going to bring together waiting and frustration," we would say, "Of course, that makes sense." If someone said, "We're going to bring together trials and self-pity." We'd say, "Of course! I do that all the time!" If someone said, "We're going to bring together pain and quitting." We say, "Yep, I know that one! I know pain and giving up, pain and throwing in the towel." But joy and trials or joy and waiting? Almost never.

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Joy and the "little whiles" of life

Listen to some of these verses. They are everywhere in the New Testament.

2 Corinthians 8:2

In the midst of a very severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.

How about:

1 Thessalonians 1:6

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

James 1:2

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds,

1 Peter 4:13

But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.

Joy is the mark of Christian faith. It's joy that marks a Christian off from everyone else in the world. It's joy in the most unusual places that causes the Christian to stand out. Joy in difficulty, joy in suffering. It's the joy we show in waiting that really is our Christian witness. You find people standing back and saying, "I understand why you'd be angry. If I were in your situation, I'd be so frustrated. If I were in your situation, I'd collapse. If I were in your situation I'd yell at the nurse or the doctor or the poor employee who is working for the airline when your flight is delayed. I understand why you'd really give it to them." But when you show joy, joy in trials, the world has to ask what is going on in your life.

When a Christian expresses defiant joy, joy in the face of difficulties; joy in the face of waiting, it's because the Christian is actually rejoicing not in the pain as if we're masochists, not in the cancer as if we don't suffer. The Christian is rejoicing in the good they find.

Here's what Miroslav Volf, a great Christian theologian, wrote:

When we rejoice while suffering it is because of some good that is ours despite suffering (for instance, God's character, deeds and the promise of redemption) or because of the good that suffering will produce (for instance, a child for a mother in childbirth). Put more abstractly, "joy despite" is possible on account of "joy because".

We always rejoice because of something good.

Joy and God's goodness

Here's what we read in verse 7:

John 16:7

But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

If you have a Bible, I'd love for you to underline that phrase, "it is for your good". These words contain the most basic statement of faith that a Christian makes about God in this bad world. Christian faith goes something like this: despite the badness of the world, I can still experience the goodness of God. It is for your good, Jesus says, that I'm doing this. All that God does, Christian faith says, is always for my good.

Is that your faith? Is that your approach to the world? That God is good and he intends good and works for good all the time in every circumstance. Is that your bottom line? Life can be very painful in this world. Jesus says this in verse 6:

John 16:6

Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things.

In this world, you're going to be disappointed. Maybe you're hurt now. Maybe your heart is broken. In this world you can feel alone. You can feel misunderstood. You can feel abandoned. But do you carry with you all the time the knowledge that God is still good? He's always up to something good – our good or through our pain, the good of someone else.

I want to read to you a note that I received from a woman named Karen. This is what she wrote:

Hi Pastor Rich,

I enjoyed your teaching on joy last Saturday night, and I wanted to give you an example from my life about joy in difficult circumstances. My husband and I co-lead Loving Someone with Mental Illness, a Support for Life group.

In our support group teaching on joy last Thursday in preparation for your current series, I told the group that our reaction to our circumstances can be our greatest witness. This is the example I gave:

After our son was diagnosed with schizophrenia, my husband and I attended the 12-week series Family-to-Family from NAMI to learn more about mental illness. Nearly all the couples and single women in the class had 20-ish sons with schizophrenia. My husband and I were the only people there that could smile ... even laugh ... and who clearly were happy to be together.

As the weeks went by, people came up to us one-by-one asking the same question:

Why are you all right? It was a great opportunity to witness about our faith to couples whose marriages were in deep trouble and others who had started to abuse substances to deal with the stress.

After that, I felt called to bring Christian hope and love to families dealing with mental illness. A friend introduced me to Jane Flewellen, and we started the group five years ago, based on 2 Corinthians 1:3-4. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of Compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God."

Jane has retired, and my husband Ken became the co-leader. Over five years, we have worked to comfort nearly 80 families in the ministry. It is the joy of the Lord that makes all the difference in surviving a challenge as hard as this one.

Looking forward to the rest of the series,
Karen

Isn't that great?

How do we find a defiant joy? Joy despite my waiting. Joy despite my pain. Joy despite the craziness that's going on in Charlottesville. How do we Christians find joy in the face of everything the world throws at us? We find joy in God's goodness, goodness to us. Goodness through us to others.

Joy and God's presence

This is what we'll talk about in a whole message next week. But I want you to just see this in verse 7:

John 16:7

But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.

There is in the Bible a strong connection between joy and the Holy Spirit. Here's what we read in Acts 13:52

Acts 13:52

And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit

Romans 14:17

For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

1 Thessalonians 1:6

You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

Here's the idea, if you want to experience joy you have to be filled up with the Holy Spirit. You start on the inside and work out. Most of us, when we're experiencing the pressure of trials, the pressure of waiting, relational pressure, financial pressure, our solution is to change our outward circumstances. "I need to change jobs immediately. I need to change the city I'm living in. I need to change this relationship. I need to change my spouse. I need to change my major, my roommate. Change my parents. And if I make these outward changes, if I rearrange my life outwardly, I will find joy."

Sometimes you may need to do some changing. Sometimes we need wisdom that requires us to make some changes. But biblical joy doesn't primarily involve getting a new wardrobe or changing from the outside in. Biblical joy is all about changing from the inside out. We can make all these outward changes and never find joy. The way we find joy is to be filled up with the presence of God.

I want to read to you in closing another email that I received from a woman in our congregation named Bonny.

Pastor Nathan,

In January of 2005, I was diagnosed with late stage colon cancer. After surgery, we learned that the cancer was a rare, particularly aggressive form called signet ring cell carcinoma, which has a very poor prognosis. The surgeon removed the tumor and affected lymph nodes, but commented that he had to leave one node that appeared to be cancerous because of its proximity to a major artery.

I began an intense chemotherapy protocol that lasted a full year, along with all of the side effects and other complications of chemo. Unfortunately, the chemo damaged my liver and I went into liver failure in January of 2006. My doctor told me that there was nothing more they could do for me. But when doctors told me my illness was terminal, I said, "That's ok because my joy is INterminal."

Throughout my diagnosis, joy was my constant theme. The joy of the Lord continued to be my strength through surgery, through chemotherapy, through blood clots, through side effects, through fatigue, through liver failure and a prognosis of death. I can tell you that the joy of the Lord is REAL; it is CONSTANT; and it will carry you through any situation because I have lived it.

I could write a book about my experience, but let me conclude by telling you that I am now 12 years cancer free. My oncologist still can't believe that I'm here, and for the past year, I haven't even had to go back for annual checkups because I am completely HEALED. A blood clot had caused an infarction in my spleen and when God healed me, the infarction disappeared - my spleen is completely intact and undamaged.

One thing I always tell people, though - you need to PRAY FORWARD and have a close walk with the Lord BEFORE the doctor says "cancer." Joy can be found in the presence of God (Ps 16:11), and so do what you have to do to get there! Where the presence of the Lord is, there is joy.

Joyfully in Christ,
Bonny Buffington

Let's pray.

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Living a Joyful Life
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