

"Seeking Joy" by Rev. Dr. Peter Thompson

Psalm 1

An instruction guide on law and lifestyle is not quite what we would expect coming at the beginning of a worship book like Psalms. So, what is it doing there? Answer: From a pastoral perspective the preface provided by Psalm 1 is an important prerequisite for understanding, interpreting, responding to, and appropriating the whole of the Psalms and life in general. The Psalter is full of the highs and lows, hopes and fears, despairs and aspirations, agonies and joys of the people of faith. It is a roller-coaster ride through the "stuff of life." And if one were to move through it with blinders, focusing only on what is immediately present in a piecemeal fashion, it would be easy to get lost in the myopic moment. Instead, something resides as a thread to carry us through and help us focus on what matters most. The assurance of complete joy when we reside and remain connected with God, with Christ, in faith.

It goes without saying, I think, that we all seek joy. We all desire joy in who we are with and what we do. Joy is one of those things I don't believe we would ever argue having too much of. If someone tells us this or that will bring us joy, our ears perk up and our eyes get big and we might even begin to drool like a St. Bernard. Our hunger for joy in our lives is a great marketing and promotional tool to get us to bite. Our longing for joy drives us and motivates us.

In an article called *Tips for Embracing Joy in Daily Life*, released by the Mayo Clinic, we are invited to reflect:

"Stress isn't new. Modern technology has made some tasks easier, but stress levels have stayed the same or increased. About 27% of U.S. adults report that they are so stressed most days that they are unable to function. Over 75% experienced at least one stress-related symptom in the last month, like headache, fatigue, nervousness or feeling depressed.

Joy is a powerful emotion and harnessing it can be a remedy for stress-related burnout. Contentment and joy can positively improve physical and mental health and overall well-being. Here's what you need to know to build, cultivate and sustain joy in your life.

- Understand the difference between Happiness and Joy: "Happiness is fleeting, but my joy still drives me on a terrible day," says Karizma. "Because I have a purpose in life, I still have joy even during a horrible time."
- Compound Joy: Joy isn't experienced in a vacuum. Most of the time, it's a feeling or sentiment that spreads to others through your attitude and actions. "I think of joy as a ripple or a domino. On my team, we share a connection of wanting to care for women and children," says Karizma. "This shared purpose, and joy, builds a connection between everyone on the team. When you link joy together, it becomes even stronger."
- Focus on what you can control.
- Express gratitude.
- Assume good intent.
- Concentrate on building relationships.
- Keep perspective.
- Help is available."

Joy! Just choose joy! Did you know it is just that easy and perhaps just that hard? The Mayo Clinic makes great suggestions- particularly the one about happiness being fleeting and circumstantial while joy is

transcendent of circumstance; however, most of what they speak of is self-dependent. I think something, more specifically someone, very necessary is missing in their research and report.

Yes, joy is indeed a powerful emotion and yes, harnessing it can be a remedy for not only stress but all kinds of things. How? Not because of our creation of it, or choosing of it, but because joy is a divine gift from God; a gift and fruit of the spirit. Fortunate enough for us, God wants nothing more than for us to have complete and full joy. Great news, right? You bet! So much so, we can read in the scriptures that God goes to great and unthinkable lengths to provide the opportunity for all God's children to be filled with complete joy. None more important than the gift of God's own son, who was born, lived, died, was raised, and ascended to take away the darkness and sin of the world. Why did God send Jesus to us? Again, so that death and darkness and despair and sorrow can all be defeated and so that we would want to be a part of all Jesus is and all Jesus does, because after witnessing all Jesus is and all Jesus does and all he can do, who wouldn't want to be on Jesus' side? We are foolish to not want to be on Jesus' team.

In his book *Desiring God*, John Piper quotes John Edwards and "The Excellencies of Christ."

"The person of Christ brings together infinite highness and infinite condescension, infinite justice and infinite grace, infinite glory and lowest humility, infinite majesty and transcendent meekness, deepest reverence towards God and equality with God, infinite worthiness of good and greatest patience under suffering evil, exceeding spirit of obedience with supreme dominion over heaven and earth, absolute sovereignty and perfect resignation, self-sufficiency and entire trust and reliance upon God."

Joy can be ours, but Jesus tells us in John 14 and 15 that we must abide (reside and remain) with him to get it and experience it. Edward's effort with "The Excellencies of Christ" is to give a flavor of what he sees when he is delighting in Jesus. Because of who Jesus is and all Jesus does for us, how could we not delight in him?

In the same way Jesus is telling us to abide in him, the psalmist, many years before Jesus' birth, charges God's people to take delight or have enjoyment in God, for to do so will lead to complete joy.

The Hebrew word for delight is 'ānaḡ (אוֹנֵג), which is an imperative verb (a commanded or instructed positive action). It means "live or spend in enjoyment"—put simply, to enjoy. Dictionary.com defines delight as "to take pleasure".

Psalm 1:2... **"their delight is in the law of the Lord and on God's law they meditate day and night"**

Psalm 37:4... **"Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart"**

Jeremiah 15:16... **"Your words were found and I ate them, And Your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; For I have been called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts."**

Matthew 5:6... **"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."**

John 6:35... **"Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst."**

Philippians 4:4... **"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."**

Complete and full joy is found when we take delight in the Lord. Taking delight in the Lord means that our hearts truly find peace and fulfillment in God. Taking pleasure in God results in complete satisfaction and contentment *in God*. When we delight in God, our desires are fulfilled because our contentment is satisfied *in God*.

The idea behind Psalm 1 and other verses like it is that, when we truly rejoice or “delight” in the eternal things of God, our desires will begin to parallel God’s and we will never go unfulfilled. Matthew 6:33 says, **“But seek first the kingdom of God and God’s righteousness, and all these things [the necessities of life] will be given unto you.”** Alexander Maclaren, a Scottish minister and expositor of Scripture, once said “Longings fixed on God fulfill themselves.” When you delight yourself in the Lord, you experience satisfaction and contentment. God fulfills the desires of your heart because, when you delight in God, *God* is your desire.

We see more reasons to delight in the Lord in Psalm 1:1–4, which says those who delight in the law of the Lord are “like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit in each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do” (NLT). Delighting in the Lord produces spiritual stability and fruitfulness in our lives.

Imagine a flourishing tree by the river, continuously bearing fruit to fulfill its God-given purpose and benefit those who eat of it and shelter in its shade. Even when storms come, the tree’s roots provide the stability to keep it safe and sound. In dry seasons, it has enough nourishment stored up to sustain it, keep it healthy, and minister to the needs of others. It is not shielded from trouble but stands firm and thrives in trouble. It is sustained, satisfied, and prosperous.

Delighting in the Lord enables us to be like this flourishing tree—spiritually nourished and healthy, bearing fruit for the kingdom of God, blessing the body of Christ, and able to stand strong in the storms of life. When we delight in the Lord, we are content, satisfied, and sustained, even in hard seasons of suffering and trials.

To find complete and full joy we must delight in the Lord. But how?

First, let’s look at how *not* to delight in the Lord. Psalm 1 spells it out in contrast and Isaiah 58 also does a good job answering how *not* to delight in the Lord. Isaiah 58 describes the people of Israel as *seemingly* delighted to learn about God; they act pious and righteous, but they’re really just pretending (v. 1–3). It’s all outward appearance, willpower, and manufactured “delight”—it’s not from the heart. God tells the people that as they go through the motions, they’re doing it to please themselves, not to please God. They’re selfish, neglecting to care for the needs of others (v. 3–5). They fail to care about what God cares about. So genuine delight in the Lord is more than self-determination or checking off the boxes of a spiritual to-do list. The question to be considered is: “How authentic is your faith and delight in the Lord?”

On the flip side, God called David “a man after my heart” (Acts 13:22). David’s delight in God was a natural byproduct of *knowing* God. David knew God’s character because he sought the Lord in prayer and through God’s Word (Psalm 1; 19; 27:4; 119). As he did, David experienced God’s power, faithfulness, grace, and mercy, and he saw the nature of God demonstrated in God’s creation. He displayed his delight in the Lord through obedience to God’s laws, praise and worship, remembering God’s wondrous works, and proclaiming his worthiness to all who would hear.

“The reason many apparent Christians do not delight in God is that they do not know God very well,” wrote respected theologian and Bible teacher James Boice. “And the reason they do not know God very well is that they do not spend time with God.”

Think about that for a moment. The people you spend the most time with are usually the people you know the most. Simply because you’re with them often, you learn their likes and dislikes, their personalities and habits, the way they talk, and how they think. You know them well enough to anticipate how they’ll respond in certain situations. This is especially true when you genuinely enjoy these people. You want to be around them, watch them do what they do best, celebrate their accomplishments, hear about their heart’s desires, and meet their families and friends.

Getting to know God comes by spending time with God. How are we doing with this?

- Psalm 1:2 describes a person who is blessed because they delight in the law of the Lord. One way we delight in the Lord is by delighting in his Word. We can enjoy reading or studying the Bible.
- Recognizing, receiving, remembering, and celebrating God’s gifts to us—this includes partaking of the Lord’s Supper (James 1:17, 1 Corinthians 11:23–24)
- Engaging with God’s family—the Church, the body of Christ—in worship, the preaching of God’s Word, and fellowship (Ephesians 2:19–21)
- Praying—God is listening! (Psalm 116:1–2)
- Observing God’s creation by spending time in nature (Psalm 19:1)

Check lists and to-do lists aside, joy is found in the richness of our covenant relationship with God. Our journey in search for joy is available for us all; within us and right in front of us. God has gone before us, is with us now, and promises to always be with us to the end of the age. By the power of God’s grace through faith we can come to experience and be filled with complete joy.