

The Encouragement Project Week 4: Joy and Delight (Psalm 37:1-9)
David Bawks - Pathway Community Church (May 23, 2021)

Good morning Pathway! Welcome to our service this morning. I hope you've had a great week. This month of May our focus has been on encouragement. BG started by looking at John 16 and the promise of Jesus that we are not alone, that we have the promise of answered prayer, and that we are covered by Christ's victory. On Mother's Day she shared about the persistent love of God from Hosea, and how we do have images throughout the Bible of how God cares for us in a maternal and female way. Last week we focused on prayer and going before God to dedicate our families, our nation and our church to Him. At the beginning of this series, BG gave a definition of encouragement, and I'd like to review that for us again. The dictionary defines encouragement as 'the act of giving someone support, confidence or hope.' Pastor Jared Olivetti has written about 4 dimensions of encouragement:

- The giving of strength, often for a difficult task.
- The speaking of comfort and truth
- A call from alongside
- Building up (<https://gentlereformation.com/2018/09/05/what-is-encouragement/>)

We see examples of encouragement when God spoke to Joshua as he was taking the mantle of leadership from Moses to take the people into the promised land. When Ruth was gleaning grain and looking to build a new life for her and Naomi, Boaz encouraged her and spoke kindly to her. In Acts, when Paul and his companion would return to the churches they had planted, they would encourage them and build them up in their faith and commitment to God.

This week and next week I'm going to reflect on some psalms and what we can learn about encouragement and our faith from them. Please turn to Psalm 37 with me, which is one of my favorites.

Psalm 37 Of David.

1 Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; 2 for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. 3 Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. 4 Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

5 Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: 6 He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.

7 Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. 8 Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil. 9 For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.

Right before Psalm 37, in Psalm 35 and 36 we have God's people crying out to him for help. Now in Psalm 37, we have an answer. We have some guidance for how we handle fear and jealousy and the positive emotions that replace them. As I look at this psalm, there are two things I'd like us to notice. First thing:

1) Don't get angry about those who are doing wrong.

One phrase is repeated three times in these verses: don't fret. Don't fret because of those who are doing evil, and don't be envious of those who are doing wrong. In verse 7, don't fret when people succeed in doing wrong. Do not fret – it leads only to evil. So what is fretting exactly? The word means to become hot, or fly into a passion. It's the word used when Cain became angry that God did not accept his sacrifice. It's the word used when Moses came down with the ten commandments and saw the Israelites dancing and worshipping the golden calf, and he burned with anger and broke the tablets of stone. Several times it is used to describe God's anger at the sin and rebellion of Israel in the wilderness.

But here, we are told not to let our anger burn hot, not to worry or fret when people are thriving through wickedness. I don't exactly what this looked like in David's time, but I thought of someone like Jeffrey Epstein, who became rich and famous and incredibly well connected, would regularly host and spend time with the wealthiest and most powerful people in the world. On the surface, his life can look quite appealing, living in a mansion, traveling on a private jet, and so on. But he was convicted of terrible crimes, and it did not end well for him. Like the grass they will soon wither, and like green plants they will soon die away.

This type of situation doesn't merit the emotional burden of our anger and jealousy. It is not worth our time or focus. This doesn't mean we should overlook sin or injustice, laugh it off and say oh it will all be taken care of eventually, but I believe the focus here is on our emotional state, on our emotional response. The focus of this word is on heat, of burning anger, especially on those who seem to be doing better than we are doing because of taking shortcuts or other illegitimate reasons. We should not be envious of those who are benefiting or profiting off of evil, because they will fade and die away.

Now I do think there is a righteous anger – we are told to be angry, but do not sin, there is a place in our lives for anger against evil that does motivate us to push for what is right and holy. But I think we have to be able to avoid internalizing all the evil and pain that we face,

because that becomes an intolerable burden on our soul. For those who do work with poverty and human trafficking and child abuse and other horrific evils, there has to be a way to avoid living in constant agitation and fear and anger, because this will suck our joy and ability to cope. The past year has given us lots of reasons to fret or be angry whether it was from watching people flout rules when you were working hard to be safe, or from feeling like your freedom was being curtailed with all the restrictions. What then is the alternative to fretting, to burning with unhelpful anger and envy? Our passage gives a clear alternative. Here it is.

2) Instead, delight in the Lord.

One of the turning points in my spiritual life came in college when someone gave me John Piper's book *Desiring God*. He lays out a compelling argument that joy is not a bonus part of the Christian life that you may get if God has chosen to bless you. It is not an optional cherry on top of the ice cream, but instead he argues that joy is the essence of following Jesus. He lays out a biblical case for the centrality of joy that he calls Christian hedonism. He summarizes this by saying that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

We see the centrality of joy throughout the Bible. In Hebrews we read that Jesus *for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame...* (Heb 12:2). Jesus knew that the end result of his torture and death on the cross was joy. Pure delight.

My favorite verse in the Bible comes in the middle of what I just read: Psalm 37:4 - Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart. I memorized this is the previous version of the NIV from 1984, just slightly different, which says "Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart." There are two questions that this verse raises for me:

- 1) How do I delight myself in the Lord?
- 2) How will God give me the desires of my heart?

Delighting in the Lord I have found to mean is when God provides my ultimate reason for living, that my faith and trust in God gives me the strength to do what I need to do. I have found delighting in the Lord through Christian community, through reading the Bible and coming to see more of what the Bible is saying, and through enjoying time with Jesus. Through sharing whatever I'm going through with God and asking for God's wisdom to lead me and God me. Through taking extending time to reflect and pause to hear what God is saying to me and what he is teaching me.

For me, I have found that over the years God has given me the desire of my heart. My desire has always been for community, for significance, and for ministry, and these are the desires

that God has consistently granted to me over the years. When I was newly arrived in Nairobi at school, God brought friends and community into my life, and I was also invited into positions of leadership and ministry. For many years I desired to be married and have a family, and this did require some waiting, but this is a desire that God granted to me. There are some others desires for writing a book and doing some other writing projects that haven't yet been granted but I believe that God will continue to refine the direction of these desires and to bring them to fruition.

There's also another important aspect to this verse, and as we spend time with God and as we delight in Him, we also find that our desires are refined and molded and adjusted. Sometimes they may be completely changed or removed from us. When God is our supreme enjoyment, then He will change our desires. We will desire what he desires.

Emotions are very important in the Christian life. As we build our relationship with Christ, we should enjoy spending time with Him and following Him. Our only true and lasting joy in this world is in Christ. Christ knows what we need and He will meet all our spiritual and physical needs. When Jesus left this earth, He sent us the Holy Spirit to comfort and strengthen us. The word Jesus uses is a word for comforter, helper, and encourager. The Holy Spirit is the source of our joy.

What has the pandemic taught you about yourself? Going through crisis is a great chance to see what your faith is based on and how you hold up under pressure. I believe that God is continuing to teach me how to live a life of joy based on the permanence of my position as God's son, and not on the changing situations I'm in. Not on what I'm able to do or not do, or on the people I'm able to see, or anything else that is external and outside my control. But joy is being able to choose your response to any situation.

I'd imagine that you've heard before about the difference between joy and happiness – that joy is an inward state, but happiness is an outward response. Joy is lasting and deep, happiness is more superficial and changes. Joy is based on core truths that don't change, happiness is based on situations that do change. These are true – but I also believe they can be overstated, and that true, genuine deep joy will usually lead to an expression of happiness. They can't be completely separated, otherwise then I feel that joy doesn't really take on an actually meaning, and becomes abstract. There are times our hearts our heavy, when we go through grief and challenge and don't exhibit happiness but are able to hold on to a deeper sense of joy and faith. But this joy and faith will generally lead us back to the expression of joy through our happiness.

We are told to rejoice always. In Acts, the disciples are described as being *full of joy and with the Holy Spirit* (Acts 13:52). When Paul is writing to the Corinthians, he says that "*in all our troubles my joy knows no bounds.*" (2 Cor 7:4) The Christian life is one of joy in all situations.

Emotion are a key part of the Christian life. We may imagine that our holiness is measured more by what we do than by how we feel, and what we do certainly matters. But we also must look at and evaluate how we feel. Do we do our quiet times, our Bible reading, because we have to or because we want to? It is good to spend time in prayer even when we don't feel it, but if that happens often it is a sign of something wrong spiritually. We cannot grow if we are not abiding in Christ. If we do not have joy, we are not abiding in Christ.

We can be very regular and proficient in church and even in reading our Bible and not have any joy. That was the problem with the Pharisees. They did not have joy in their relationship with God, instead it was a relationship of business and regulation. When someone is healed, they did not respond with thanksgiving but rather complained about the timing of the healing.

As you go through this week, consider how you look at those who seem to be thriving through taking shortcuts or taking advantage of you or others. Does that get up your anger and resentment? Is that stealing your joy? Remember the command here to not fret. Don't let it work you into anger or jealousy, especially if you're not in any position to take direct action or make the situation right. But delight in the Lord this week. Focus on how you can enjoy God, and the things of God. Set your mind on things above. Focus on what doesn't change, and your response to the situation beyond your control. Here are two reflection questions for us as we go through the week.

Reflection Questions

- 1) How can you delight yourself in the Lord this week?
- 2) What desires has God placed in your heart?