

Finding Joy Deuteronomy 30:15-20

INTRODUCTION

Max Lucado tells the following story about a man named Robert Reed. He writes:

"I have everything I need for joy!" Robert Reed said.

His hands are twisted and his feet are useless. He can't bathe himself. He can't feed himself. He can't brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his underwear. Strips of Velcro hold his shirts together. His speech drags like a worn out audiocassette.

Robert has cerebral palsy.

The disease keeps him from driving a car, riding a bike, and going for a walk. But it didn't keep him from graduating from high school or attending Abilene Christian University, from which he graduated with a degree in Latin. Having cerebral palsy didn't keep him from teaching at St. Louis Junior College or from venturing overseas on five mission trips.

And Robert's disease didn't prevent him from becoming a missionary in Portugal. He moved to Lisbon, alone, in 1972. There he rented a hotel room and began studying Portuguese. He found a restaurant owner who would feed him after the rush hour and a tutor who would instruct him in the language.

Then he stationed himself daily in a park, where he distributed brochures about Christ. Within six years he led seventy people to the Lord, one of whom became his wife, Rosa.

I heard Robert speak recently. I watched other men carry him in his wheelchair onto the platform. I watched them lay a Bible in his lap. I watched his stiff fingers force open the pages. And I watched people in the audience wipe away tears of admiration from their faces. Robert could have asked for sympathy or pity, but he did just the opposite. He held his bent hand up in the air and boasted, "I have everything I need for joy."

His shirts are held together by Velcro, but his life is held together by joy.

Ah, joy. That thing we crave but often can't find. Not happiness, mind you. Happiness is easy to find. Read a good book. Eat a chocolate chip cookie. Have a pleasant conversation. Treat yourself to an extravagant purchase. You can find happiness in any number of places.

But I'm talking about joy. Genuine joy.

People confuse those two words and even use the words interchangeably. But they are not the same.

- Happiness is based on your circumstances. It's that giddy feeling you get when things are going well—when the paycheck comes in, when your health is great, when relationships are smooth.

But what happens when life takes a nosedive? The Bible tells us there is something far deeper than happiness—something that doesn't disappear when hardship comes. That's where the difference between the two is noted.

Jesus said:

These things I have spoken to you, **that My joy may remain in you**, and that your joy may be full. (John 15:11)

Did you catch that? **His joy remains**. It doesn't fade when life gets hard. It's not based on luck or circumstance.

- Joy does not come from money, from our relationships, or from our successes.
- Joy comes from God. It's a supernatural gift that God plants in your heart when you walk with Him.
- As about 40 women in our congregation will soon study, joy is the by-product of the Holy Spirit's presence in your life.
- And that's why it's called the fruit of the Holy Spirit:

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

During this month of September, we are going to be talking about finding that kind of joy. We are going to think about how we live our Christians lives and how genuine, lasting joy is the natural result of it.

That's what we see in the three Scripture readings for today:

- Philemon will know the joy of God if he does what honors God and forgives and restores Onesimus back despite the wrong this runaway slave had done.
- The New Testament reading reminds us that following Jesus involves carrying a cross, but nonetheless leads to the kind of relationship with God that is blessed and joyful.

I am going to center on the Deuteronomy passage this morning. When Moses stood before the children of Israel and spoke the words recorded in Deuteronomy 30, he was laser-focused on the importance of a life fully devoted to God.

#1: HE OFFERED A CHOICE

*See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.
(Deuteronomy 30:15)*

At first glance that doesn't seem like a hard choice for me to make: Life and prosperity vs. death and destruction. Who signs up for death and destruction? Would you like a side order of death and destruction to go along with your spicy chicken sandwich?

The reality is that no one chooses that. It is something we all already have. Death and destruction comes naturally to us. As difficult as it is for us to believe, when that sweet little baby is brought forward to the baptismal font, my task is to remind us that:

We are born children of a fallen humanity ... (LBW, p. 121)

Death and destruction are the consequences of being born. We don't have to choose it. It is already ours. That shouldn't surprise us. Look around. Watch the news. Read the paper.

Moses tells the people "It doesn't have to be that way. Death and destruction do not have to be the words that define your life. You have choice." You can choose "life and prosperity." Please understand that word correctly. Moses is not preaching a prosperity gospel like some of our televangelists are prone to do.

During the presidential campaign of 1928, a circular published by the Republican Party claimed that if Herbert Hoover won the election there would be "a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage." He won, of course, and seven months later the stock market crashed and we entered the Great Depression.

Moses isn't promising chickens either. He is, however, promising what Jesus Himself promised in John 10:10:

My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. (John 10:10, NLT)

#2: HE ISSUED AN INSTRUCTION

Lest they question the seriousness of the offer, Moses follows up with a word of instruction. "I command you ..."

For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws ... (Deuteronomy 30:16)

That was my Dad's strategy too. He'd say to my brother and me "Boys, I like you to get your chores done right after breakfast." Do you hear the choice there? It's what he would like. And then he would follow up with "And just to make sure we understand each other, you are not leaving the house today until they are done." Dad meant business, and so did Moses.

But this was no ordinary instruction issued by Moses, for you cannot command a matter of the heart. You can command people's actions, but you can't command their hearts. But nevertheless, that is what Moses does.

For I command you today to love the Lord your God ... (Deuteronomy 30:16)

Moses knew from his own firsthand experience that if the people were ever to fully experience the rich and satisfying life Moses offered to them, it had to start with a loving relationship with the God who would make it possible.

We know that phrase, don't we? It's the Great Commandment, according to Jesus:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind. (Luke 10:27)

The ability to make the right choice and to follow the instruction starts with a loving relationship. If I don't love God, I'll never obey Him. If I don't love my dad, I won't do what he asks either.

#3: HE PROVIDED A WARNING

But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. (Deuteronomy 30:17-18)

There's the heart thing again. If your heart turns away, that will lead to disobedience and disobedience ultimately leads to destruction.

I think Moses must have been speaking from his own experience at this point. If you know the story of Moses, you know that he was banned from entering the Promised Land because he himself chose the path of disobedience. His disobedience resulted in death and destruction in his own life. And he didn't want to see that happen to these people.

But it is precisely what did happen. The people of Israel started out strong. They conquered the Promised Land. They claimed it as their own. But then they turned away from God and began to worship idols and the false gods of the societies around them. Death and destruction ensued, and they ended up in captivity.

Do you see a parallel in your own life? Don't things work better when you choose to do what God wants rather than what you want?

#4: HE REQUESTED A RESPONSE

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life... (Deuteronomy 30:19)

Our theme for this month is "Finding Joy." You have heard through the previous months that JOY is often used as an acronym for:

J esus
O thers
Y ou

Genuine lasting joy is found in choosing to invest your life in your relationship with God and the things that God is doing and blessing.

- You might find occasional happiness in other places
- But you will never know JOY if you and God are not on the same page.

As this month progresses you will hear more and more about how you can serve God through the ministries of Grace Church. Chris Norman introduced it earlier in this service as he encouraged you to consider serving on one of the many ministry teams we have.

Moses called for a choice. Choosing a life focused on what God is doing is a great choice. Together let's allow God to speak to our hearts this month to see how He is calling to us to serve Him.

Amen.