

The Two Faces of Joy

By David de Bruyn

Joy – is joy not the quest of every human heart? Do not all the pursuits of man eventually amount to one thing – a pursuit of joy? Perhaps you could sum up everything you did this year as ultimately a quest for joy. I like to think of joy as the face of love. Joy is the tangible outward fruit of loving someone or something – you gain joy from it.

Now, joy is not an optional extra in the Christian life. If you are growing in Christlikeness, joy will be there. Paul mentions joy as part of the fruit of the Spirit: *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith...”* (**Galatians 5:22**). Notice it is one fruit, with many flavours, not many fruits. The one fruit of the Spirit includes the very prominent flavour of joy.

Paul spoke of his ministry to the Corinthians in this way: *“Not for that we have dominion over your faith, but are helpers of your joy: for by faith ye stand”* (**2 Corinthians 1:24**). Paul’s ministry was that he worked for their joy. It might sound like an oversimplification, but is not all discipleship ultimately training another believer to love God, to pursue and gain their joy and delight in God? John said that he wrote his entire first epistle for this purpose: *“And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full”* (**1 John 1:4**).

As we come to the end of a year, and look forward to a new one, I would like to consider the two faces of joy. I’d like to look at joy, not as an end in itself, but as the clearest expression of your love for God. If joy is the face of love, then your joy in God is the expression of the state of your love for God.

When a couple have very little enjoyment in each other, it is fairly safe to say their love has gone cold. Conversely, one of the ways we immediately identify love between two people is the great delight they gain from each other.

How do we live in this joyful state that glorifies God? Well, let’s begin with the foundation. The foundation of joy in God is humility. We’ve defined humility before as desiring God above all else. A humble person has set their absolute hope in all that God is, in Christ. Such a person will be the happiest, most joyful person of all. Why?

1. Firstly because they are pursuing joy in the right place – God. A pursuit of joy in other things will ultimately come up short. Created things will, in the long run, fall vastly short of the Creator Himself.
2. Secondly, a proud person can never know the kind of joy we are talking about. True spiritual joy is rooted in grace, and grace is given to the humble, while God resists the proud. Grace never comes to the proud. Therefore, the proud man has no taste for grace, and can never have this kind of joy.

With humility as the foundation, let’s look at the two faces of joy.

One side of joy is gratitude – grace received

Gratitude is simply the joy we take in grace that has been, or is being, received. Gratitude is joy in past or present grace. In fact, the word gratitude is related to the word grace. They both come from similar root words. Why do I say that gratitude is joy in grace received? Because it is only when we regard something as being grace that we are thankful for it.

If a worker bargains with a boss to work a certain amount of pay for a certain amount of hours, when he receives his pay, he is simply expecting what he earned. He might be glad to receive the pay, but that does not equate to thanksgiving. Gratitude would be if the boss decided to pay him double the agreed-upon rate. This was over and above what he deserved, what he had earned – hence it was grace. And when he received grace humbly, he would experience joy.

This is why the root of gratitude is again, humility. The proud do not receive grace gladly. They instead resist it. You may know of some people who always seem to be giving, but actually get annoyed or embarrassed if you try to give back to them. Often, the problem there is pride. Pride resists the vulnerable state of the humble, which simply, and happily, receives.

Think about why some people are unthankful, and some are grateful. It really does not have so much to do with the actual things in our life, as it does the state of our heart. Here's an illustration to see why humility is the real root of thankfulness. Imagine a child brought up with all of life's luxuries. He has lived in the finest of houses, with the best of food, and an endless array of toys, gadgets and entertainment that go with being born with a silver spoon in your mouth.

Now imagine another child who has literally been clothed in rags all his life, whose shoes are open at the toes. His meals have been infrequent, inconsistent and never quite certain. His one-roomed house is lit only by the paraffin lamp of his mother. Now, let us compare the two. Let's imagine we go to both with the gift of some extra clothes. Do you think the first boy will be thankful? No.

Why not? Because he is so used to his blessed status, that he regards such things as a right. He expects them. He even complains if he has had the same meal twice, because for him, variety of foods is expected. For him, a gift of second-hand clothes is not grace, it is an insult. The problem is not with the clothes, it is with his heart. His pride regards himself so highly, he does not see himself in the small way he should, and therefore cannot be thankful for grace.

Now we move to the second child, and we give him 5 pairs of second-hand clothes, and his face lights up with joy. We give him a little toy, and he is enthralled. Why? Because in his life, he never began to regard any of those things as an expectation. His circumstances were so meagre that the tiniest thing will be met with the surprised joy of a thankful heart. He has regarded his poor circumstances as the norm, and so anything above that is seen as a gift of grace.

What we are trying to illustrate is the difference between the proud heart which regards itself as deserving of much, and is therefore unthankful, and the humble heart which has no expectations, and is therefore thankful.

This is really the meaning of Christ's statement: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit."* People who see their own soul poverty before God, people who admit their bankrupt status before God, people who would be thankful for the smallest thing from the hand of the Creator – this is someone poor in spirit. Jesus says such people are blessed.

See, if I regard myself as a pretty great guy, who ought to receive the best in life – when I receive the best in life, it will be nothing less than normal in my eyes – it's what I expected. However, if I regard myself as deserving of very little or nothing, that is, poor in spirit, even the smallest things in life become icing on the cake.

Take it a step further: if I realise I deserve hell, and instead am receiving salvation, eternal life, a relationship with Christ, plus some earthly benefits and joy here – my gratitude is doubled. Your gratitude is proportional to what you think you deserve. Gratitude is present when you regard what you are receiving as grace. The unthankful are simply proud people exalted in their own eyes.

A lack of gratitude is a lack of grace-awareness. I have 'expectancy-syndrome.' I expect things like food, shelter, clothing, respect, comfort, entertainment and health. So when I don't have it, I complain, and when I do have it, I am not thankful. When you are proud, it becomes almost impossible to finally be pleased. *"Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied"* (**Proverbs 27:20**).

The proud heart is forever moving the goal post of its own contentment. Since it believes it deserves so much, and deserves more than it is getting – thankfulness will always be a receding mirage to the proud heart. But the humble heart finds an inexhaustible fountain of things to be thankful for, simply because the heart is in submission to God. It has embraced reality: 'I am a servant of God, who deserves hell. Just look at all I have now by His kind hand.'

So thankfulness is joy in grace received. It takes the time to meditate on the truth of what I truly deserve. **Ephesians 2:1-3** describes what my real inheritance was: *"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience, among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."*

You can look back on this year and consider the grace of God. Consider simply the things He gave you – whether it was food, clothing, transport, shelter, hot water, electricity, computers or cell phones. Look around the place you stay in and consider some of the things God has given you.

Consider the people God sent into your life to help you. Family, friends, teachers, counsellors, pastors. Think of the assistance you have received from people in this past year – whether it

was financial, whether it was advice, whether it was education, or whether it was simply encouragement or correction. Think of the wonderful helpers God sent your way to strengthen you.

Think of the kindnesses that came your way this year. From hot coffee on cold days to cool breezes on hot days. From good results in the exams to a salary raise at work. From good food to hot water, from fun and laughter to good health, from opening some doors to closing others – small and great things that God sent your way this year to make life somewhat easier at times, somewhat more enjoyable. Kindness makes the heart smile. Count your blessings – the things God sent your way to make you smile.

Consider how God sent you many negative things to help shape and mold you. God's love means He wants us to have the greatest joy possible – that of knowing Him. But our hearts and minds are too small, too weak, too numbed by the trivialities we keep taking in through TV, the internet and other sources to truly be able to handle the weight of glory. So, God sends adversity our way to tone and strengthen our spiritual muscles, so that we can learn to handle the weight of glory.

Thank God for the struggles, the pains, the losses, the threats, the humiliations, the persecution, the heartache, the trials. **James 1:2** says: *"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you fall into various trials."* Why? Because the trying of your faith works endurance. Your spiritual muscles will be able to handle more, and thereby come closer to loving God with all your heart, soul and mind. Adversity is also grace.

Consider God's grace in sparing your life. How many people – younger, fitter, richer, and perhaps even holier than you – went into eternity this past year? But you are still here, reading this. That's God's grace. Another opportunity to repent and receive Christ if you have not yet done that, another year to surrender all to Christ, and grow into His image.

Consider, above all, the grace God gave you this year, if you are His child, spiritually speaking. We could never come close to naming them all. **Ephesians 1:3** says that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places. Every possible spiritual blessing, God has poured upon us. Salvation. We are secure in Christ, and are certain of eternal life. His blessed Holy Spirit has sealed us till that day, and continues His work in us assuring us that we are His.

The Spirit illuminates the Scriptures. He convicts us of sin. He guides us and gives us wisdom as we study the Scriptures. He produces the fruit of Christlikeness in us. He prays for us. Christ continues to pray for us. His presence goes with us. His High Priestly work on our behalf means we are never without prayer. God the Father continues to shower us with kindness in Christ – treating us now as children, not as enemies.

We could go on and on. The fact is, if you start with the right view of yourself – someone who deserves hell – you will find it quite easy to count the blessings of this past year. The amount of blessings of past and present grace will soon go way beyond what you can enumerate. But

here is the vital thing. If we are merely glad for these things, as ends in themselves – that is not true joy.

This can be a momentary happiness, but all it does is glorify the thing or person – like the food, or the house, or the car, or the spouse. Our gladness for these things, if it stops there, merely exalts the thing that we are delighting in as great. It only becomes joy when our eyes continue up from the gift onto the hand, up the arm and into the eyes of the One who gave it to us.

Our joy is in God. This is when we are truly rejoicing in grace received. If you regard it as grace, it necessitates that you believe there is a Gracious Giver. That Giver is God. This is where true joy is found. When your gladness in a thing, a human, or a circumstance, let it cause you to trace that kindness back to the very heart of God and rejoice in Him.

We will find inexhaustible joy in meditating on the kind of God He is to feed sparrows and take care of us. We will find indestructible happiness is tracing the sunbeam of a gift up to the Sun Himself – God the gracious giver. As **James** says in **1:17**: *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”*

The Bible instructs us not to rejoice in the things God gives, though we certainly can be thankful for them. No, Paul says, rejoice in the Lord always. How do you rejoice in Him? When in humility, you look at past and present grace, and are thankful, and you allow your thankfulness to transform into joy in the Giver – God. But there is another side to joy.

The other side of joy is hope – grace to come

Hope. Biblical hope is something quite different to how we use the word hope today. Modern conversations use the word like this, “I hope it doesn’t rain today” or “I hope the petrol price comes down soon” or “I hope the car doesn’t give us any problems on our trip.” All these statements are filled with uncertainty.

In these statements, hope simply acts as a desire for something, but with no assurance that it will come to pass. You do not know what the weather will be like, or how your car will act on the trip. Now, that’s fine for modern conversation, but that is not what the Bible means when it uses the word hope. Hope in Scripture refers to a confident assurance of future grace.

While gratitude is joy in past grace, hope is joy in future grace. Just a brief selection of verses will show that hope and joy are cause and effect.

- **Romans 5:2**: *“By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”*
- **1 Thessalonians 2:19**: *“For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?”*
- **Hebrews 3:6**: *“But Christ as a Son over His own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.”*

- **Romans 12:12:** *"Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer..."*

Biblical hope is a rock-solid assurance that God will be gracious to us in the future as well. See, many Christians who are indeed thankful for the grace they have received, short-circuit their joy by lacking hope. They do not make the connection that God intends thanksgiving for past grace to turn into joyful hope for future grace.

This was exactly the problem of the Israelites. They had received so much past grace, but when confronted with a trial, they did not do the obvious spiritual arithmetic – if God was gracious to us in the past, if He has been gracious to us today, He will be gracious to us in the future. God promised us grace in the past, and He came through with His promise. There is no reason to doubt His promise for future grace.

You cannot face life today merely by looking at the past and trying to be thankful for it. No, God meant for your thanksgiving over what God has done to produce hope: the confident assurance that He will do it again. There can be no joy in my life if I regard God's past grace as the exception, while I look to the future with gloomy despair. No, the other face of joy is hope.

What do we hope in? We trust that God will perform that which He said He would. What did He say He would do? The list of promises is about as endless as the list of past blessings. He promised to provide for us. He promised to give us enough grace for any situation in life. He promised to guide us. He promised to be with us. He promised to work all things together for our good. He promised that suffering for righteousness turns into our good.

And – He promised He would return. **Romans 8** is jam-packed full of promises to the believer. It is often the fact that Christians are ignorant of these promises, or do not spend sufficient time meditating on them and drawing out all their powerful implications for their lives, that they suffer from depression, despair and hopelessness.

Having a confident assurance that God's grace, which has so proved itself in the past, will take us right through the future and into eternity, is the ground for rejoicing in a believer. Again, a similar thing happens. Our joy is not primarily in the things or circumstances that we confidently hope for, it is in what these things imply about God.

Our joy goes beyond the promise *"I will never leave you nor forsake you"* (**Hebrews 13:5**) to the implication of that promise – Christ is faithful. He is not fickle. He is reliable and longsuffering. Our joy sees beyond the promise *"all things work together for good to them that love God and are called"* (**Romans 8:28**) to what that promise suggests about God. He is loving, kind, merciful – transforming so much into things that work for our ultimate glorification and likeness to Christ.

And just like the root of joy in past grace is humility, the root of joy in future grace is humility. Pride resists the vulnerability and trust that hope suggests. Rejoicing confidently in what God said He would do suggests we have transferred our trust from self to God. It means we have rejected seeking satisfaction in Self – in the things we can control and measure and boast in, and have cast ourselves upon the mercy of God.

The proud person misses this, and experiences only the weak pleasure of boasting in their own achievements. The believer has the added luxury of boasting in the future, resting securely in the promises of God. That does not mean we believe life will be smooth and rosy – it means we rejoice that it is in the hands of the wisest One of all – the Creator of life.

Humility stops rejoicing in bank balances or security systems or financial schemes or human relationships or entertainment as the way to deal with the future. It turns wholeheartedly to God, for pleasure in who He is, as seen in what He promises to be and do for His children.

How was your joy this year?

Perhaps you simply did not take the time to rejoice in past and present grace – that is thanksgiving. God commands, *“In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you”* (**1 Thessalonians 5:18**). Let your thanksgiving turn into rejoicing in the very character of God.

Perhaps you lacked hope – that is, you lacked joy in the future grace God promises. Allow your thanksgiving for past grace to transform into Biblical hope in grace to come. Above all, let the foundation be a humble heart that desires grace. If you do not desire grace, you will neither be joyfully thankful for grace already received, nor will you look forward with joy for more grace to come.

The two faces of joy are thanksgiving that looks back, and hope that looks forward. With both faces, we can obey the Word when it says in **Philippians 4:4**, *“Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.”*