

The Pursuit of Joy in God – Part 1

Do you have joy? All human beings pursue joy. It's a natural human inclination – we want to be as fulfilled, happy and joyful as possible. We seek meaning, purpose, contentment, satisfaction. In short – we seek the complete fulfilment of our existence.

The problem comes in how humans seek to meet this goal. Some turn to simple physical pleasure. They hope that the thrill of sexuality, especially illicit and immoral sexuality will fill that void. Others hope that the huge variety of tastes in the infinite combination of foods or travel experiences will bring them a sense of meaning. Others turn to the effects of alcohol or drugs for physical pleasures.

Some people look to honour from others to thrill them. Whether by climbing a corporate ladder, achieving remarkable things, aspiring to fame through the media or simply by boasting when in company, these people believe the greatest joy is to have others admire, revere and praise them. They feel they will meet their sense of joy in being worshipped.

Similar to this are people who desire power. They believe that if they are in a position of great power, they will receive these other things. They believe that to be able to control others, will bring them great pleasure, and meet the longing in their heart.

For others, they look to the accumulation of wealth. Usually, this is a means to achieving the other two – the ability to buy luxuries, or even relationships, the ability to buy honour from others, and to be revered and even envied for their great wealth.

This may be an oversimplification, but I think it is generally these four areas that people look to for their meaning, purpose and joy – fame, fortune, power and pleasure. Now, we must ask the question: Which of these is the answer? Which of these will meet man's greatest need? More to the point, how can we know what is the answer, since different humans seem to think their pursuit is the correct one?

Well, it is only logical that if you want to know the truth about the human heart, you must ask the Designer of the human heart. Just as we go to the manufacturer with our broken appliance, it is the wisest thing to do to turn to our Creator with our broken hearts. He made us, and He alone knows what is wrong.

Where do we find Him speaking as to our problems, His plans and purpose? The Bible – His Word. The Bible is God's point of view. No other point of view matters. What God says, is truth. So what does He say about humans and their pursuits? Well, He makes no bones that we are on the wrong track with a pursuit of fame, fortune, power and pleasure:

From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members? Ye lust, and have not: ye kill, and desire to have, and cannot obtain: ye fight and war, yet ye have not, because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts.

James 4:1-3

In other words, why is your life filled with conflict and turmoil? Because all humans are in a selfish pursuit of pleasure, and most often, we step on each other's toes to achieve that. Most often, to achieve fame, fortune, power or pleasure for myself, it must be at the expense of others.

God says we lust – we strongly desire these things, and we kill and destroy to achieve them. Even when we fight, says James, we still don't have. Why? Because we are not asking. Who must we ask? Clearly, our Creator. But James says, those who do ask Him, ask Him for these exact same selfish things, and so obviously God will not answer.

In fact, God uniquely privileged one man to test these very things for lasting satisfaction. King Solomon tested physical pleasure. With feasts beyond measure, his desire for food was satiated. With seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines, you can be sure he tested the world's notion that sex with as many beautiful people as possible is the meaning of life.

With a kingdom that was so powerful that **1 Kings 10:23** says, *"So King Solomon exceeded all the kings of the earth for riches and for wisdom,"* Solomon certainly tested wealth as a means of joy. His name was spread abroad such that we are told *"And there came of all people to hear the wisdom of Solomon, from all kings of the earth, which had heard of his wisdom"* (**1 Kings 4:34**). So he tested fame as well.

Power was his as the king of Israel, with the largest and most extensive kingdom of all Israelite kings, ever. So what was his conclusion to all this? He wrote the book of Ecclesiastes to tell you: *"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity"* (**Ecclesiastes 1:2**). Emptiness! Vanity, says Solomon, are these pursuits for lasting and total joy. If this is our purpose, he says, then life itself is futile.

It seems we need to find out what God's purpose was in creating us. If we find this out, we can move swiftly into a life of meaning, purpose and joy. So why *did* He create us? We find the answer in **Isaiah 43:7**: *"Even every one that is called by My name: for I have created him for My glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him."*

There it is: God created us for His glory. God's own purposes were the reason for creating us. We see this echoed again in **Revelation 4:11**, as the 24 elders fall before God and cry: *"Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created."* God's pleasure. That's the same as saying – for His glory.

God takes the highest pleasure in His glory. God's purpose, as it were, is to glorify Himself. The glory of God is difficult to define. It is best to think of God's glory as the sum of all He is. It is His many-splendored beauties. It is all His attributes summed up in one phrase – His glory. It's also what's meant when the Bible speaks of His name. Phrases like "I have sworn by My name," or "The name of the Lord is a strong tower" refer to all that God is – His glory. In fact, His names are simply explanations of who He is.

But God's purpose, ultimately, is to glorify Himself. Now, let's bring out into the open. What's in our hearts when we hear this? Perhaps, part of us says, 'Well, that sounds a bit selfish. I thought God created us because He loved us, I thought He saved us because He loved us. Now it sounds like He did it all because He loves Himself the most. Isn't love unselfish?'

Here's the answer. God is the most Perfect Being of all. You could say, with reverence, that He is the most lovable of all. He is so perfect and glorious, that no one deserves as much love and pleasure in Him as He does. Therefore, if God loved someone else more than Himself, He would actually be unjust. He would be dishonest to value someone else more than Himself, since He is the most valuable.

So when God delights most in His own glory, He is being most loving. Since He is Perfect, the Ultimate, you cannot apply the same ideas of humility and self-denial that are necessary for creatures, and worse, fallen creatures. If God denied Himself, He would actually be sinning. But don't think all this means He does not love us.

See, God's glory is like rain upon a mountain. The creatures below drink from the pure rivers that flow from it. God's glory is an overflowing fountain of joy. He did not create the universe to meet some unfulfilled need in Himself, as if He was lonely or needed praise, like a vain human. No, He did it because His glory is so intensely enjoyable, so unbelievably glorious, that it bubbled over into the creation of a universe with intelligent beings that could experience and share that beauty.

See, now we are getting closer to understanding our purpose in life. If the most natural thing in the universe is God glorifying Himself, you can be sure, it will be the most natural thing for all of His creatures. Indeed, did our friend Solomon, who tested life for joy, agree with our conclusion? Did he believe this was the purpose of life? Listen to his own words as he concludes his book:

Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep His commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.

Ecclesiastes 12:13

The whole duty of man is to fear God. Fearing God is synonymous with glorifying God. Fearing God is simply a life responding to God's revealed character. It is glorifying Him. Man's purpose and duty in life is to glorify God. Not only his duty, but his delight.

When God created Adam, what did He say of Him? *"And God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness'" (Genesis 1:26).* Man was created to know, enjoy and reflect the glory of God. Adam existed in this bliss at the beginning. He enjoyed the glory of God. It was his life's purpose, to enjoy, love, delight in God. God's glories were unbroken and ever before him. His life was pure joy.

So what ruined it? We know the answer – sin. Sin was when Adam decided to find pleasure, meaning, and purpose outside of the glory of God. Here is why sin is so terrible. Adam turned

His back on the supremely satisfying, infinitely delightful life of knowing and reflecting the glory of God, to seek it in a fruit.

This fruit was to give him knowledge of good and evil, and, according to Satan, make him a god. A god with power, a god who would be worshipped. There and then, Adam turned to power, pleasure, fame and fortune. He made a god out of something that was not a god. He turned from God as his God, from God's will as his own, to striking out for his own life, independence, joy and meaning outside of His Creator. And all sin is essentially the same.

All sin, at its root, is pride. It is the rebellion and independence of creatures seeking their meaning and joy outside of God. All sin is unbelief. It is unbelief in God's Word, that real joy and life is in Him. All sin is essentially idolatry – turning to something else for joy and meaning. Sin is forsaking the glory of God as the source of our lives. Doesn't that make the often quoted **Romans 3:23** seem even clearer: *"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."*

So here is an interesting way of seeing sin: it is a joy-killer. Sin is the thing that kills your true joy in God. Sin is looking for meaning in the wrong place. Sin is the rebel refusing submission to the Lord, who knows what's best for us. God has made a way for us to get back to His purpose of glorifying Him by the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Through this, we can find forgiveness of sins, and a new life that pleases God.

It's ironic and sad at the same time: Man will only find his purpose in glorifying God. Man fights against this, his only possible chance at true joy, and lives for his own meagre pleasure outside of God's glory. As CS Lewis put it, we are like children making mud pies in a slum, who do not know what is meant by a holiday at the seaside. We fool around with fame, fortune, power and pleasure, when infinite joy is offered to us.

And yet, the amazing thing is that humankind's desire for meaning, fulfilment and joy, and God's desire for His own glory, are not at odds – they are the same pursuit. God's purpose in salvation is bringing us to know Him and to find that infinite joy that is knowing and reflecting the glory of God back to Him, and to others.

In one sense, there is a war when we are seeking our joy outside of God, falling short of His glory. But in another sense, there is a glorious union of purpose, if we will submit to God, and find that our pursuit of joy – and His pursuit of His own glory – unite in the Christian life. Didn't Jesus conclude a simple explanation of the Christian life with this statement:

These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

John 15:11

So we've established the reality – our purpose, our ultimate delight will be found in glorifying God. But the problem is that humans cannot glorify God due to sin. Let's take it a step further, and now think of the positive aspect. We know our sin prevents us from glorifying God, and thus truly enjoying life. But let's assume our sin problem could be dealt with. What would

glorifying God look like, practically speaking? Well, the simplest answer is that for us to glorify God, we must resemble the brightness of His glory – Jesus Christ.

Who being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Hebrews 1:3

Jesus Christ – God the Son – was and is the perfect reflection of God’s glory. He is the one that displays God’s glory to men: *“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).* The greatest way to know and enjoy the glory of God is to resemble Jesus Christ, and grow into His image. And now, we have described God’s purpose in saving us:

For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.

Romans 8:29

God wanted us to have a family resemblance to His Son, the image of His glory. God is most glorified in us when we are most like Him. We must first be reconciled to God by repentance and faith. But then, we must grow to become more like Him.

So you can see the way it is all tying together. God’s purpose is to glorify Himself. He created us to glorify Him. Our highest joy and meaning will take place as we glorify Him. The greatest way to do this is to resemble, to grow into, the image of Jesus Christ. If you are pursuing meaning and joy, then with your whole heart, you must embrace God’s plan. To grow into His image, God gives us simple advice in Ephesians:

That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; and be renewed in the spirit of your mind; and that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.

Ephesians 4:22-24

There are three steps there, and we’ll look at them in successive weeks. The first is: kill your joy killers. The second is: behold the Joy-giver. The third is: reflect the Joy-giver. However, the foundation we want to lay for these three stages is simple. Consider this question asked of Jesus:

“Master, which is the great commandment in the law?” Jesus said unto him, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.”

Matthew 22:36

Jesus said the greatest commandment of all is to love God with all our heart, soul and mind. How does this relate to what we are saying? If you want to pursue this goal of glorifying God by

becoming like Jesus Christ, then your inner heart's motivation must be this. Your heart's motivation must be to love God with all your heart, soul and mind.

Your heart will always gravitate toward the thing it loves. It will always draw your life toward the thing it believes will bring it joy. So, when we say love the Lord with all your heart soul and mind – realise we are also saying, “love loving God.”

A problem I had for many years is I thought of loving God as some sort of sacrifice I was making, a selfless giving to God, at my own expense. To be sure, the Christian life includes suffering, sorrow and sacrifice, but where I was going wrong was in my perception of this whole command.

I thought, maybe even subconsciously, that loving God was something I did for His benefit. Almost like He had a need to be loved, and I was responsible for meeting that need. Like God craved my fellowship, and even if it was somewhat painful to me, I ought to oblige God, and give it to Him, because that was my duty. But in all this, I missed the point.

To love God is not to meet His needs, for He has no need of my love. To love God, in a sense, is to meet *my* need! Don't get me wrong, we are not using God, but it is us who need His fellowship, not the other way around. We need to see that the command to love Him is not so much a command to give Him love, like He needs it, it is to be delighted in Him. It is to make Him the one you love. It is to make God the source of your joy.

Scripture commands us to enjoy God: *“Delight thyself also in the LORD; and He shall give thee the desires of thine heart” (Psalm 37:4)*. But we are not to think of loving God as something we give to God, but something that we love, or enjoy, above all else. We all have things we love – because we enjoy them. Why is it that we think differently when we think of loving God?

We must love to love God. He must be the thing, the One that you choose, to be what you will pursue for meaning and happiness. It is this fervent desire for His sweetness, the fervent desire to enjoy and reflect His glory, that will underpin the following stages of killing your joy killers, beholding the joy-giver, and reflecting the joy-giver.

See, you cannot deceive your heart for long. Many Christians go through the rollercoaster of spiritual ups and downs, because, unlike David, they cannot say: My heart is fixed. I have settled on my delight in life, and even if it seems cold now, I will pursue it with all my heart. I will pursue the love of loving God, the joy of God Himself.

Such Christians exist for a time, trying hard to obey God, even please Him, out of a sincere desire to do right. But they exist without the love, the enjoyment of it all. After a while, their heart rebels, they indulge in sin, like a thirsty heart starved of enjoyment. They hate themselves, rightly repent, commit to doing better, but then return to that life of obedience with no love of loving it.

These Christians incorrectly think that to seek to enjoy the Christian life, to seek the joy of knowing God, is somehow a selfish motive, and not worthy of a Christian. But that is incorrect.

Let's illustrate it this way: Suppose you plan a big surprise meal for a loved one. You go to great efforts to put this together. You are filled with joyful anticipation at the thought of their delight and enjoyment of your surprise. In fact, the joy of preparing it is half the reason you're doing it!

Now, would you stop, and say to yourself, 'Now wait a minute. I am enjoying this too much. This is becoming selfish. This is supposed to be for my loved one. Here I am, doing this thing for my loved one because it brings me joy. How selfish. I must now empty my heart, and do it solely for them.'

No – that would be ridiculous. You are being unselfish in your efforts. That is bringing you joy. And if you emptied the preparation of your joy, you would actually be emptying it of your love for that person. Your love for them is precisely what stirs up the joy, and vice versa. It's the same with God. If we do not love God with our heart, soul and mind to the degree that we love to love Him, we are really not loving Him.

Loving with all your heart, soul and mind speaks of the mind and the emotions engaged in a delight and adoration of God. Furthermore, your delight in preparing that meal glorifies your loved one in that your sheer delight in them shows how much you value them. And so, it is only the one who loves God in the sense that they love to love God, that will glorify God as the worthy One.

It's this enjoyment of, and delight in, God, which God commands as the first commandment. It must be the thing underpinning all. And only the one with such an attitude will truly succeed in glorifying God. Imagine a man who brings his child a gift of his favourite toy. The child lights up in delight. 'Oh, Daddy, you remembered! You know how much I wanted this.'

Then imagine the father says, 'No, son, I did it because it's my duty. It would be selfish of me to have bought you the toy because I enjoy the thought of delighting you, so I did it out of pure, unselfish duty. That makes my love more noble.' In fact, his love has just become no love. He has torn the very heart out of his love. It's when he says, 'Son, I love you and seeing your smile brings me joy' that he has truly loved.

The father unselfishly loved his son and unashamedly sought the joy of loving. And so it must be with God. God unashamedly offers rewards for obedience, promises joy, delight, and happiness. He does not warn us off obeying Him for these reasons. He does not command us to love Him in a way that brings us no joy.

On the contrary, he rebukes people who honour him with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him. He rebukes the church at Ephesus that has all the doctrine and ministry right, but no love. No love of loving Him.

The one who loves to love God truly glorifies Him, as they show the world how worthy God is of our affections. They show the world how truly satisfying God is. They show that glorifying God is the meaning and purpose of their lives, and that it fulfils every need in them. We have seen that our meaning and purpose is to glorify God. We've seen that our pursuit of joy, satisfaction and meaning harmonises with God's, if we first repent and submit to God in Christ.

Then, we must seek to love God with our whole heart, soul and mind. This means we set our delights, affections, minds, thinking and emotions onto God Himself. Onto pleasing Him, and the pleasure of pleasing Him. In Part 2 of this series, we'll examine how to kill our joy-killers.