

The Pursuit of Joy in God – Part 3

We've been looking at pursuing our joy in God. We saw firstly that our joy will be found in glorifying God, since that is our created purpose. We then saw that this is accomplished by becoming more like Christ, since He is the radiance of God's glory. To become like Christ, we must follow the stages of **Ephesians 4:22-24** – put off the old man, be renewed in your mind, and put on the new man.

We called that first stage 'killing your joy-killers.' Today we'll look at the second and third stages, which we'll call beholding the Joy-giver, and reflecting the Joy-giver.

Beholding the Joy-giver

To understand what this means, John 15 is our next stop. There Jesus says something remarkable about His teaching on the Christian life: *"These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full"* (**John 15:11**).

Notice some very important things. Firstly, Jesus speaks of *"My joy"* – His joy. That's important for us to see – that God has joy. God is infinitely happy, contented and joyful in Himself. Half the problem we have as Christians is that we don't think of God as joyful. We have a conception of God as frustrated, gloomy, even irritable. God is depressed over the world, or He is terminally angry with all the sin and suffering. But that is not what Jesus says.

Jesus says He has joy, and implies that His joy is perfect and full, which of course it must be, since it's God we're talking about. You say, "Well, how can God be happy with all that is going on in the world?" The answer lies in the fact that He is sovereign: *"Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure'"* (**Isaiah 46:10**).

That means God is completely in control of history, including the evil actions of men, including the suffering and sorrow, and is weaving together a magnificent tapestry that will glorify Him. It does not mean He authors sin, it means He includes those dark spots on the tapestry to make up the whole thing. And God, who knows the end from the beginning already – is not frustrated.

God is not anxious that it is not working out, or unhappy. True, He feels sorrow and pain for us, for our sin, but it is the pain in the midst of an ocean of joy. God is infinitely joyful. That's so important. If we are going to find joy in God Himself, we will have to behold Him and find that He is joyful Himself. Children can never take joy in a grumpy, moody, miserable father – they can only try to stay out of his way, or try to appease Him. They can never enjoy Him.

You can never enjoy God if your view of Him is unbiblical. You need to see Him for who He is, One Who is joyful, and therefore in a position to give you joy. I think a person's view of God will pretty much determine their entire life. The way you think of God governs the way you respond.

So the foundation of beholding the Joy-giver is that we must see He is joyful, and it is a good thing to come to Him for joy. As A.W. Tozer put it – God is easy to live with, if we are saved and walking with Him. Do you realise that God is joyful, and the source of meaning and purpose will be found in Him? Not from Him, or via Him, but *in* Him. The Psalmists cry out from the experience of enjoying God:

- **Psalm 16:11:** *"Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore."*
- **Psalm 36:6-8:** *"How excellent is thy lovingkindness, O God! therefore the children of men put their trust under the shadow of thy wings. They shall be abundantly satisfied with the fatness of thy house; and thou shalt make them drink of the river of thy pleasures."*

Notice that Jesus goes further in John 15:11 and says, *"that My joy may be in you."* This is amazing. Jesus does not want us to experience the two-bit, unsatisfying joy of sin. He does not want us to eat the dry bread of our own joy. Rather, we must have His joy – the joy God has in Himself, pulsing through us. He wants us drink deep at His well.

Notice the result in the same verse – that your joy might be full. Full! An absolutely satisfied human being is the one who has found joy in God. One who has experienced the joy of God in God. Now, how does this happen? Well, Jesus explains it when He says, *"These things have I spoken unto you – that your joy may be full."* What things? The things He has just been saying about how the Christian life works.

Jesus likens the Christian life to the growth of a grapevine. He says He is that vine. That's important already. He is saying – the Christian life is My life, not yours. The Christian life is the life of Christ. He likens His Father to the farmer who prunes the vine, and Christians as the branches.

Christians are extensions of the life of Christ. Christians are individualised extensions, or versions, of Christ's life. The life comes from the vine into the branches. The branches don't have life in themselves, they have life as part of the vine. Christians don't have life outside of Christ, He is their life. Paul pointed this out in **Galatians 2:20:** *"I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me."*

Also important to notice is the fruit-bearing theme. The branches must produce grapes. They produce a fruit in keeping with the life of the vine, because they are simply extensions of the vine. They are not going to produce apples or oranges, as their very nature, and the sap flowing from the vine through them, will necessitate they produce grapes. The better the grapes, the more the vine is glorified, the more the vine is glorified, the more the farmer is glorified.

So what is the command? What must we do? The command is in **John 15:4:** *"Abide in me, and I in You."* Abide simply means remain. Jesus says, remain in Me, and I in You. What does this mean? Well, He is using the vine and the branches to help us understand. A branch must abide in the vine – it must remain connected to the vine. If the branch is disconnected from the vine,

it is disconnected from its own life, from its very source of producing fruit. The branch must stay connected, continually feeding from the vine.

That helps us see it. The source of our joy is God Himself. If we are to have fullness of joy, we must be continually feeding on Christ. We must be fellowshiping with Him, drinking in His character in large amounts. The thicker a branch, the more fruit it will bear. That's because its connection to the Vine is larger – it receives more sap, and can therefore produce more fruit.

A Christian who is to find the joy in God must not only kill their joy-killers – kill their sin – they must behold Jesus Christ continually. They must look into His joy-giving face repeatedly, and often. Jesus gives us a bit more of an understanding in **John 15:7**: *"If ye abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you."*

Jesus hints at what this abiding means to the Christian – *"if My words abide in you."* The Words of God. He then says, *"ye shall ask what you will."* That's prayer. Listening to God in the Bible, and talking to God in prayer. This is abiding. Notice Jesus says, *"My words must abide in you."* It is not enough to simply read the words of God, they must abide in us. They must stick in our minds. We must behold God in the Word, and the image we see must profoundly affect us all day.

Like Moses who saw God's glory on the mountain, and came down with his skin shining. He saw God's glory, and could not help reflecting it. Paul uses that exact illustration when explaining to us that this is to be the pattern of our Christian lives in **2 Corinthians 3:18**: *"But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."*

As we look deeply into the Word and behold the Joy-giver, we see His glory, that image will begin to change us. Like someone who spends time in the sun, which can affect the colour of their skin. The less exposure to the sun, the less difference. The exposure must be significant, and it must be consistent.

See, that's abiding. Significant exposure to God in the Word, and consistent exposure to God in His Word. The problem with Christianity is not that it has been tried and found wanting, it is that it has been found difficult and seldom tried. Ploughing into the Word takes some effort. It takes some discipline. But there is no substitute. The Psalmist challenges us: taste and see that the Lord is good. No one can taste for You, you must experience Him for yourself.

I think of the hours we put into TV, entertainment, sport, games, chatting to friends, social media, going out – and then we say, 'I have no time for my Bible.' The truth is, we made no time for God. Remember Jesus' words: *"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also,"* (**Matthew 6:21**).

In other words – the thing you treasure, the thing you value, the thing you seek after, that is what you love, that's where your heart is. We have to believe that God is the greatest treasure, and worth every effort we put in to find Him in the Word.

Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like *"unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field."* Notice the words *"for joy thereof"* (**Matthew 13:44**). The man here gives up on all the other things that have been bringing him joy, for the better thing. He is not reluctant to forsake all he has, because of his conviction that this treasure far surpasses those things.

Do you believe that? Do you really believe that God is the greatest treasure of all, the Joy-giver? The fact is that a heart which pursues joy outside of God is guilty of two sins – unbelief and idolatry. We don't believe that God is the source of joy – that's unbelief, and so we turn to other things that we believe will bring us joy – that's idolatry.

The foundation for you beholding the Joy-giver, or renewing your mind, as **Ephesians 4** puts it, or abiding in Christ, as **John 15** puts it – is to believe that God is worth the pursuit. **Hebrews 11:6** takes on a special light when we see it this way: *"But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him."*

Notice – you must believe God is real, but beyond that, that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him. Mark those two words – *rewarder*, and *diligently*. God will be sweet, He will be a treasure, He will be glorious, to the one who diligently seeks after Him.

When we pursue our joy, we do it with all our hearts. Humans who think that meaning and real life is found in power, pleasure, fame or fortune, go after those things with a vengeance. They work long hours. They make great sacrifices. They endure hardship and physical discipline. They even commit acts of crime and sin against each other in the pursuit of joy and meaning.

Is it fair, then, for Christians to expect the truly satisfying nature of God to be found without them applying much effort? Would it be just for the riches for God to be accessible to the half-hearted, the casual, and even indifferent seeker? No, God saves His pleasures and joys for the 'diligent seeker' of **Hebrews 11:6**, for the thirsty soul of **Psalms 42:1**. If God is the most precious treasure of all, should we expect there to be no effort in uncovering all He is? That is crazy.

Yet our fast-food, instant-everything society cannot suffer a God who will be found on His own terms – which includes seeking Him with our whole heart (**Jeremiah 29:13**). God insists that we put our entire heart, soul and mind into the pursuit of who He is, because the greater the longing and the search, the more glorified the object of the pursuit, and the more satisfying the experience upon finding.

People often climb mountains, pushing through hours of hardship for the thrill of reaching the top. God is not elusive in the sense that He diabolically avoids us, but He will only manifest Himself to the hungry heart. Why should He reward the lazy Christian with the treasure of Himself, when many of His other children put in 100%? God likens Himself to a great treasure, worth all the whole-hearted pursuits of mankind put together.

We need to seek Him with all our hearts in the Bible, pleading like Moses, *"I beseech thee, shew me thy glory."* Reveal Yourself to me, God! We need to squeeze out of every verse the character of

God, and then let that truth so saturate our being as to change our behaviour. That's meditation.

We need to meditate on God. We cannot be satisfied with second-hand accounts of God from others. We cannot be content to hear only the preacher tell us about God – we ourselves must plough into the Bible and search out God, like hidden treasure. And as we behold the joy-giver, we will be changed. Christ's joy will be in us, and our joy will be full.

The reactions to God can vary: it can range from praise to awe, submission to repentance, thanksgiving to fear, commitment to adoration, joy to deep sorrow, surrender to rejoicing. But overall there is the fulfilment, the meaning, the satisfaction that alone fills the human heart when a human beholds God's glory.

This only takes place because the Holy Spirit chooses to reveal God to the seeking Christian in the Word. No one would find God simply by seeking. God reveals Himself, but He puts the condition on His self-disclosure as a diligent pursuit of Him. That leads us to the third stage – the putting on the new man of **Ephesians 4:24**.

Reflecting the Joy-giver

See, you kill your joy-killers – put off sin. You then turn to the Joy-giver, and behold Him. But then inseparably linked to beholding the Joy-giver is reflecting the Joy-giver. You cannot truly behold God's glory and not react. You cannot behold God and not be changed. Moses came down the mountain with his face shining. Once you see Christ and His joy in God becomes yours, there will be an overflow.

That overflow is a life of obedience. It's the delight of walking in Christ, of imitating His beautiful character. It's hard to even separate the reaction you have to God's glory in the Word, to your entire life's reaction to Him. They are to be one. It is as your mind is renewed – as you see life His way – that your actions, your life, changes. You put on the new man.

Notice how Jesus ties the abiding in Him to the bearing of fruit. *"He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing"* (**John 15:5**). Jesus says that without the abiding, without that continual beholding of Christ, there will be no fruit. We might ask, what is the fruit Jesus is speaking about? Well, if He is the vine, and we are branches, we will bear grapes. Grapes are a product of a grapevine.

Logically then, the fruit is Christlikeness – Christlike character. And that ties it all together, because that's what we said will glorify God most: if we reflect Christ. Jesus says, *"Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples"* (**John 15:8**). We see Christ, and we respond to that sight by imitating Him. We love Him, and we desire to obey Him: *"If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in His love"* (**John 15:10**).

We could really call it worship. Worship is simply how much you think God is worth. It is not something you turn on and turn off. It is the statement of your life, as to how much you value God. The one who Beholds God as He is in the Word comes away dazzled by how precious God is, and their life is a response to that. They then worship God with obedience, submission, thanksgiving, praise, delight, dependence, overflowing witness.

See, unless your obedience is a response to God, it truly does degenerate into habit, ritual, legalism, and eventually hypocrisy. It is the one who loves God, and loves to love God, who obeys in a way that glorifies God. Reluctant obedience does not glorify God, for it makes Him to be a grievous Master. Reluctant prayer does not glorify God, for it makes Him out to be One not worth speaking to. Reluctant Bible study does not glorify God, for it makes God out to be someone hardly worth hearing.

But in all our obedience and service, we must remember that God does not need us. He tells us in **Psalm 50:12**, *"If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof."* God does not need us. We need Him. Our purpose is to glorify God by loving Him. Paul told the Athenians in **Acts 17:25**, *"Neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though He needed anything, seeing He giveth to all life, and breath, and all things."*

My pursuit of God is not for His sake, it is for mine. Nevertheless finding my ultimate joy in Him is what glorifies God, because it exalts Him as the ultimate Joy-bringer, the worthiest of pursuits, the best of all.

It's important to add that this obedience is only possible by continual dependence on the Holy Spirit. Paul said, *"Walk in the Spirit and you will not fulfil the lust of the flesh"* (**Galatians 5:16**). We link this to abiding, continual, unbroken dependence on God the Spirit to help us kill our sin, behold Christ, and imitate Christ. It's impossible to imitate God without God.

So we must pursue our joy in God – putting off the sin that kills our joy, renewing our minds by beholding the Joy-giver, and then putting on the new man by reflecting the Joy-giver. A final thought: Did you ever think that so much of Earth is a training ground for heaven? Christ's parables so often imply that the faithful steward in little will be rewarded with much.

Let's tie that to the fact that the brief descriptions we have of Heaven in Revelation all seem to emphasise one thing – worship. It's clear the delight of Heaven is going to be God Himself! Now, is it not perhaps possible that the more you desire and seek after God in this life, the sweeter your experience of God will be in Heaven?

It seems to me that God is using this life to teach and train us for what the next one will be. It follows then that if the next life will be primarily about knowing and savouring God, then the direction of our lives now is to do that. Perhaps so much of God's work in our lives is to prod and push us toward a deeper desire for and delight in God.

I cannot think of a worse fate than to be in Heaven, while you have a distaste for God. That is why no unbelievers will be there – because they didn't want to be there, by the admission of

their own lives. Their very lives stated that they did not want God, and ironically, Heaven would perhaps be Hell for an unredeemed heart.

Yet the believer must ask, 'Is my greatest treasure God, and therefore the greatest reward to be closer to Him?' Only this will put Heaven into perspective for us. I personally think the greatest reward of all in Heaven – the crowns – will not be crowns in the way they are used on earth, but special audiences with Christ, the privilege of sitting closer to the throne, the wonder of dining personally with Your Creator and Saviour.

How much more should we make desiring God the drive of our lives? Heavenly treasures become sweeter and more valuable only to the extent that we pursue them in this life. Heaven will be sweetest for the martyrs, the hungry God-chasers, the Christians who were satisfied with nothing less than God Himself.