

TIME FOR JOY



Christmas is a time for joy. We are told to be joyful. We want to feel joy. We want to share joy with others. But joy can be hard to find sometimes. It isn't accidental. Joy is something to pursue and guard—to cultivate and value. God gives us the season of Christmas to interrupt our patterns and calendars. It is a time for more celebration and gathering with friends, to treasure family and to remember the birth of Jesus Christ—God's greatest gift of His own Son. Let's take time for joy.

TIME FOR JOY • JOHN 16:16-24 • Timothy McConnell • December 2, 2018

Do you like exercise? Be honest. Does anyone like exercise? I know, some people do, but those people are strange. Abigail and I go to the gym together a few times a week, nothing ridiculous. But there's a guy at the gym we have come to call the "gagger." He runs so hard on the treadmill he starts to gag and cough until it sounds like he might get sick. He has his earbuds in, so he has no idea how loud he is! And Abigail always winds up next to him. Why does he do that to himself? It's torturous. But it must feel good later, I guess. That's how it works for me. I don't love doing it, but I like how I feel after I've done it. Well, this week we enter the Christmas preparation season in earnest. Twenty three days, people. How are you looking at this Christmas month? Does it feel like you are setting your blocks for the annual sprint, like you have to steel yourself for the annual run through the Christmas gauntlet, just hoping you survive it, hoping you don't do too much damage to your kids, hoping your marriage is still there when you get to the other side? Phew. I thought this year we would take a look at joy. I thought we could encourage one another to see this month as a **Time for Joy**. See, this is an exercise, but not a consumeristic, American-family success exercise. We all fail at that game. But what if you saw it as a joy exercise?

Joy is surprisingly hard to talk about, I think. It's the second fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5. It seems like it's on every other page of the Bible. But we have a hard time talking about joy. The minute someone uses the word, we react and get defensive. We self-evaluate and feel guilty that we don't experience or share or display more joy. We retaliate inside against the joyful people around us, assuming they are naïve and unthinking. Just saying the word "joy" can make people feel bad! I got a bulk email for pastors this week encouraging us to preach lament at Christmas. "Good news of great joy did not remove God's people from the fallen world," it said. Well, I know. And I think you know. I don't think you need me to tell you this is a hard world, a fallen world, and life is full of disappointment and pain. Do you need me to tell you that? I think the harder thing is to remember God's promises in times of struggle, and look with hope to the resolution God has planned and has initiated in His Son Jesus Christ when the world you live in looks like a mess.

I wrote a book a few years ago about being a "Happy Church." If the world looks at Christians and sees only dour-faced spoilsports, they get the

wrong idea about the God we worship and lose any hope of finding happiness where it actually can be found—in Jesus. But I didn't write that book because joy and happiness are easy. I wrote it because joy is hard. It's a fight. For me, personally, it is very hard. I'm not happy by nature. I have to fight for joy. My own psychological makeup is bent toward the melancholy, toward isolation and negative thoughts. That's what's easy for me. What is harder, the greater challenge, and the righteous call of Christ I believe, is to look up to God in pain and trust that He means what He says when He tells us the birth of Christ is "good news of great joy." So, let's look at this month as a joy exercise. What would a joy exercise look like? See, I don't think God gave us Christmas as an annual exercise in self-recrimination; a regularly-scheduled failure when we beat ourselves up for not getting it right and not feeling the joy and the plastic, shiny, glittery...you know. I think God meant to interrupt our lives each year with something better—with something life-giving, not life-taking. God wants us to receive the gift of His Son each year, and learn to receive it as joy—an exercise in joy.

Jesus talked about joy all the time. In our passage this morning, it comes up four times in eight verses. Notice he never says there will be no pain. He never says there will be no grief. He never says there will be no suffering, or confusion, or disappointment. But in the middle of all that, he confidently proclaims there will be joy. There will be a time for joy. The disciples were deeply confused by His message. Toward the end of His ministry, Jesus was preparing the disciples for His arrest, crucifixion, death, and resurrection. But how do you spell that out, really? Even if He told them plainly, they would not have known what to do with that information. So He's just working on them: "Jesus went on to say, 'In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me.'" (John 16:16) I might have translated that "in a little bit." We use the word "while" to extend expectations, like when your kids ask, "How long is this going to take?" and you say, "It's gonna be a *while*." Jesus means a short bit of time; the word He uses is to shorten expectations. It's His death and resurrection He's talking about. Pretty soon, you won't have me here like you do right now. You won't see me. But then pretty soon again, I'll be with you. You'll see me again after you never thought you'd see me again.

The disciples didn't understand. I love verse 18:

“They kept asking, ‘What does he mean by ‘a little while’? We don’t understand what he is saying.’” (John 16:18) Amen. Do you ever not understand? Even if you know and love the Lord, even if you have had times when you felt like you and Jesus were walking this life together day in and day out in perfect intimacy and friendship, when you’ve felt the Spirit of God hovering over you like a dove every moment—it isn’t always like that. Sometimes Jesus is not visible, even to those He loves. And we don’t understand when Jesus is obscured from our vision. But God uses those moments to strengthen and mature us as we carry on toward what we know by faith. The disciples did not understand. So, Jesus introduces a joy exercise.

“Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy.” (John 16:20) What’s this? This is His death He’s talking about. Get ready for grief, but get ready for something after grief. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. Jesus compares it to childbirth. “A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world.” (John 16:21) I asked my wife about the birthing process when she was pregnant with our third child, I said, “Does it really hurt that much? I mean it’s a perfectly natural process.” This did not advance my marriage. Apparently it hurts. But there is joy on the other side of the pain, “So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.” (John 16:22) After the death will come the resurrection, and then it will be time for joy again. This is a joy exercise. Can you keep your eye on joy even in the pain? Can you keep your heart set on the joy to come even in the grief? It isn’t that the pain is fake or the grief is unreal, but the joy exercise is to see with hope past the hard things and into the fulfillment of the promise of what God is doing in Jesus Christ. The joy exercise. Jesus says, then you won’t ask me anymore questions. All your questions will be answered. You’ll know. “Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete.” (John 16:24) Complete. Not ninety-nine percent. Complete. Full. Entire. Your joy will be complete, says Jesus Christ. Do you believe Him?

Jesus is setting them up to walk through a hard time, but He wants them to walk through hard times with the light of His joy ever before them. And if you’ve forgotten that light, if you’ve forgotten that

joy—well, that’s what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown. Let’s remember again, and help each other to see. There’s a red tractor dragging a tree across a frozen field. I don’t know how far he has to go, but I can see, he believes. He believes the birth of Jesus is something to celebrate. He believes there will be a time for joy. The ground all around him is frozen solid, and the wheat isn’t growing—it’s stuck in ice. The plow can’t penetrate the soil just now. It isn’t time for that. The seeds under the ground sleep. But he’s got this Christmas tree—another pagan symbol, I know. We’re not druids! But it’s for Christmas. It’s to celebrate the birth and eternal life of Jesus Christ. And he’s going to drag it home, maybe to his wife, maybe to an empty home, maybe to his kids, I don’t know. And he’s going to drag it up the stair and through the door and set it up with lights and ornaments and pretty things. It’s cold right now and lifeless, but he can taste it. Christmas is coming. A time for joy. It’s an exercise in believing, an exercise in joy.

In a bit, says Jesus, in a little while you won’t see me. It may be a hard time. It may be the hardest time of your life, for a little while. We always want to know how long. How long will the hard time last? We don’t get to know. But in a little while again, you’ll see me. Then you’ll have joy. You will rejoice. “And no one will take away your joy.” (John 16:22) This kind of joy can’t be taken from you. It’s solid. It’s not built on flimsy, superficial, plastic and glitter junk. No! It’s built on something solid—on Christ Himself and His accomplished work. Nobody can take that away. You can lose it. You can squander it. You can waste it. But it can’t be taken from you. Can you hold on through the dark into the daylight? Can you walk through the valley to the rise of the far side? There are thresholds through which we all must pass to enter the next joy. Can you look to joy? Let’s try a joy exercise.

I heard a story on the radio of a smile exercise. There are psychological studies to back this up. The guy said, “Having trouble smiling as you enter the holiday season? Put a pencil between your teeth. Force your face to smile by biting a pencil. Then,” he said, “just try to think negative thoughts. You can’t!” There’s actual science backing this up! Can you believe it? A smile exercise. Just make sure the pencil is sideways or it will make you really sad. Let’s try a joy exercise. And let me make one more point. This isn’t based on you. We will say more later, but today just notice something in this passage with me. In the beginning, Jesus says, in a bit you won’t see

me. You won't see me. But look at verse 22. He doesn't actually say "then you'll see me." Look carefully: "So with you: Now is your time of grief, but **I will see you again** and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." (John 16:22) I will see you, says Jesus. I will see you. Jesus will not lose track of you even when you lose track of Jesus. He will not forget you in your pain. Jesus' departure is not abandonment. You are not abandoned even when the Lord seems absent. I will see you, says Jesus, and you will rejoice. So, let's try a joy exercise. Today let's come to the table of the Lord again. Let's receive. Let's taste what the Lord has done for us and feed on the savory fare of the Kingdom that is coming in Christ. Let's find joy up over the grief, beyond it and past it. Jesus won't lose track of you. We don't preach the absence of wounds but the presence of a healer. Your joy is not dependent on your performance, but on receiving Christ's accomplishments and resting in Christ's intent. Receive. Be fed. Be encouraged. Be strengthened in joy.

STUDY GUIDE

TIME FOR JOY • A JOY EXERCISE

John 16:16-24

UP: Connect With God Through Spending Time in His Word

Read John 16:16-24.

1. How do you define joy? How are "joy" and "happiness" related?
2. December always seems filled with things which make joy difficult. What are barriers to joy which face you this month?
3. Jesus refers to His death and resurrection as the source of the disciples' joy. How does this news still serve as a source of joy for us today?
4. One practice which helps foster joy is gratitude. What other practices or habits could you experiment with this December?

IN: Connect with Each Other and

OUT: Connect With the World Around Us (Join God in His Mission)

Close your time with this prayer as your guide.

Lord, I wait with anticipation for your coming kingdom. Come into my life and into our world.

Into our troubles and weaknesses, into the barren places of my soul, Come Lord,

Into the war torn and the refugee, into those who live in conflict, Come Lord,

Into the homeless and the unemployed, into those who feel abandoned, Come Lord,

Into the sick and the disabled, into those fighting cancer and other diseases, Come, Lord

Into the poor and the starving, into those who are oppressed or abused, Come Lord

Into the lives of loved ones, into those from whom we are estranged, Come Lord,

Into our joys and celebrations, into our work and our achievements, Come, Lord

O Christ we long for your coming. Hasten the day when your Kingdom will come in all its glory and suffering and pain and sickness and oppression and death will be overcome forever.

*Amen.*¹

¹Adapted from Christine Sine's Advent liturgy which can be viewed at: <http://godspace-msa.com/2015/11/29/liturgy-for-the-first-sunday-of-advent/>