

“Joy: Heap Good Medicine”

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Texts: Philippians 4:4, Deut. 33:27 and Luke 2:9-14

The pursuit of happiness and joy, how are they related? . . . How about life, liberty and “the pursuit of happiness?” Thomas Jefferson took the phrase “pursuit of happiness” from John Locke¹ and incorporated it into his famous statement of a peoples' inalienable right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” in the Declaration of Independence. This phrase is also found in our Constitution: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

The little word pursuit suggests that the original meaning was something like “pursuing and obtaining of happiness” and, as the footnote explains this was tied up with the right to amass wealth, to have and to hold property (private property). Owning one’s own home/housing falls under the obtaining of happiness clause. And, just because my mind works this way, this has implications for how we understand “urbanization.” Urbanization is the process by which people are concentrated, or centralized into cities. This led to the de-housing, or un-homing of America—some of what was lost in the process of urbanization is that private home ownership was eclipsed by rental housing—multi-unit apartments (condominiums, high rises, and apartment complexes) increased displacing *private home ownership*. Suburbia provides one mediating construct—in “suburbia,” private and rental arrangements could both be accommodated, say, outside city limits. The movement known as “homesteading” is somewhat of a return to the agrarian dispersion of housing—that is widely separated individually owned households which practiced self-sustaining agriculture (with some control over one’s food supply).

The reason that this is important is the 18th century agrarian setting in which our founding documents were finalized. The majority of people then were rural, not urban. Notably, industrialized mass production and urbanization developed together—commerce and merchandizing provided the context in which both the rural and urban populations intermingled! The relationship was symbiotic as long as trade persisted. Agrarian production and commerce—remember that. The indispensability of each population (rural/urban) to the other tends to be ignored historically, simply assumed, or underrated. Still, productivity/commerce supports both life and liberty and there is joy in that. The “pursuit of happiness” is varied, diffuse and, it would appear in this setting, complementary. So the country needed workers, both in farming and in industry; so the migration of people from the farms to the cities and the westward expansion of agriculture were in competition.

¹ Locke originally posited (in "Two Treatises on Government") the idea that a person's right to live a healthy life, free to amass and maintain property -- "life, health, liberty and property" -- is one granted by God. Some of the educated class, leading Puritan theologians such as Cotton Matter, took Enlightenment Philosophy very seriously—meaning the rationalism of the age effected their thought and writing. It was all the rage among the elite. And that predisposition prepared the ground for atheistic science to advance. There’s the inquisitive mind, and it potentially shades into skepticism.

We at EWBC are largely Augusta suburbanites. Some own their houses and some of those garden to supplement their supply of wholesome foods . . . and even fewer of that original group keep poultry and animal stock. Very few are bone fide farmers, orchardists and berry farmers tend to be organized as single season, single cash crop enterprises. That is our cultural setting. How does that compare with the believers at Philippi?

First century Philippi was “an ancient commercial hub” where shipping and trade predominated and the farmers who surrounded the port, supplied the food all transacted in largely open public markets. There everyone bartered, traded, or purchased their daily necessities, exchanging goods and services—and, yes, some luxuries. Paul wrote to the believers in Philippi, and he commanded them **rejoice in the Lord always**—it was good medicine to the heart and soul—it promoted health and thriving. There were scores of pagan folk around these Christians who, not being **in Christ**, knew nothing of the God of Scripture whose **revealed** intention was for them, in their own time and setting, to be happy. He wanted them to thrive

and if they would do their duty and rejoice in the Lord—not only would their hearts be healed, their souls ministered to, they would be “happily” on their way to entire satisfaction!! [Repeat twice.]

I have three things that I wish to establish about joy: 1. That joy is a duty and a choice we make; 2. That joy liberates me from my circumstances historically and currently; And 3. That joy is a delightful response to a delightful God. And you will, I am sure, see how these pertain to Christmas joy!

It is written that others **seeing our good works, our consistent love, our embrace of truth and justice** would marvel at such things and **give glory to God**.

Our affect, our attitude is our testimony as well as our gospel! Others may ask “Why are you so happy? Happy, not mindlessly optimistic nor idealistic—as are some of those we associate with. And others may search deeper, “But what is the underlying cause of your happiness ?” “What do you have? Or “what have you got that I am missing?” And is your answer, “I am just doing my duty? (Probably not.) “As I am blessed **in the Lord**, I am grateful. I am thankful and my gratitude just boils over; or, manifests itself in grateful joy.”

Because I joy in the Lord, out of obedience to his command; **I have found God to be enjoyable!** My best times are my times with Him . . . in fellowship, in worship, in service! **I was glad when they said unto me, “Let us go up to the house of the Lord.”** (Psalm 122:1) Could you declare, “Going to church makes me so very happy. I sure look forward to it!

Please note: this because He is pleased with me, I am pleased in Him. I have concluded that *although things can go badly, that **in the end all will go well.***

That God is still God keeps me from discouragement and despair. Because I know that bad times aren’t forever, that, just like the seasons change, **This too shall pass.**

God has placed me on a journey *to better me*, not to embitter me. His good will is manifest towards me in every way: First he sent His Son to save me, to pay off the debt of my sin, to reconcile me to the One who forgives me in Him! These truths give **buoyancy** to my faith—they are the **underlying/ everlasting arms which bear me up**. (Deut. 33:27) I rejoice in the closeness, the very presence of my ever-present God and Savior.

I hug Him because He first hugged me!

So Joy is a duty and a choice:

- When I choose to rejoice, I am choosing not to fret.
- When I choose joy, I am disavowing anxiety.
- When I choose joy, I am choosing to be satisfiable and satisfied.
- When I choose joy, I am choosing to eliminate disquietude . . . and that silences my complaining, my grumbling and ingratitude.
- When I choose joy, I am choosing to be lifted up rather than to be discouraged, defeated, or cast down.
- When I choose joy, I am declaring that I know, affirm and believe that the best is truly yet to come—that the very best blessings are straight ahead.

Choosing joy is freeing. The liberty to seek God, worship God, serve God—we have liberty to seek and pursue good.

The curious thing about all of this is this: **what I choose to do**—can be, no, is **independent** of what others may do to me, is independent of my circumstances.

Radically loved is radically forgiven is radically known is radically transformed, re-born,—everlastingly new!

Since Jesus has redefined me, all other definitions (whether projections of guilt, shame and regret) lose their prior power over me—and that's freedom, isn't it?! If I am who Jesus says I am, then who, or what others think I am simply doesn't describe, limit, or determine me anymore. So that's freedom and that's life. The Lord is my Redeemer! The implication of all this is huge: I have my joy already, have entered into my heavenly existence—all who inhabit heaven are filled with joy, a joy that leads to endless praise with undergirding gladness.

God delighted in creating me as well as everything else! And he created me to delight in Him, joy is my upward impulse . . . it is all I aspire to.

Joy is a delightful thing just as our God is a delightful God.

Delighting in Him is also good, the fullest goodness I can imagine. There can't be too much of it. Our daily life should be a demonstration of it. We can all be demonstrators—perhaps we should be as fired up about God as some of our secular counter parts are about politics. If we rejoice in God, we get justice and mercy in the bargain. Justice without mercy is terrifying!

Joy refreshes the marrow, bringing health to our bones.
 Joy quickens the flow of our blood even as the love of Christ purifies it.
 “It is a speaking thing, a demonstrative thing and an apparent thing!”

(Luke 2:9ff) **And lo the angel of the Lord came upon them**—enveloping, wrapping and enfolding them . . . like snow that falling accumulates on the ground. **And the glory of the Lord shone round about them.** This sourceless, and shadowless manifesting of illumination is quite breathtaking, intensely surprising, disorienting and captivating. *The terrifying nature of the supernatural became their atmosphere*—like ozone after a thunderstorm. **Fear not**, the angel, who occasioned this wonder, states. *Why shouldn't I be terrified out of my gourd?!* Because I have come to bless you, to bring good, new and happy news: **good tidings of great joy.** Not judgment, peril, disaster and doom—all of that is for another day, for the day that the king returns to resume his reign and to sit upon his throne. For my news brings **great joy, which shall be to all people.** Whatever could that news be?

This is news that is presently delivered. Not a distant promise, but a present endowment. He declares, **For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.** He is born, born this day, presently, in the city of David where you shepherds are. *Near by, near at hand . . . not very far from where you are!* A tactile, tangible, holdable form of God—even Jesus.

And this shall be a sign unto you you will find the babe in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. If you desire joy, find this king, find this Savior, find this babe—you know what you are looking for, you know what he represents—good news, salvation, forgiveness of sins, reconciliation to God, the changing of the ages. Nothing will be the same from this babe on! And with that the angel of the Lord signed off, **And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill towards mankind.**

Amen