GOD, THE CAUSE OF OUR JOY

Ezra 6:1-22

By

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How high is the pursuit of joy on your priority list? Do you view it as something that is not only nice to pursue, but absolutely necessary? Many Christians view the Christian life primarily in terms of duty and obedience, and those are not minor themes in the Bible. But how many Christians view the pursuit of joy, gladness, and delight in God as a prime duty?

All too often, we view God as a stern, cosmic killjoy, who doesn’t want anyone to get too carried away with having a good time in life. The Puritans are often falsely caricaturized as being against joy and pleasure. Someone lampooned a Puritan as a person who suffers from an overwhelming dread that somewhere, somehow, someone may be enjoying himself. That’s a false view. It was the Puritans who said, “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

John Piper has helpfully modified that classic sentence: “The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying Him forever” (Desiring God [Multnomah Books], 10th Anniversary Edition, p. 15). He also rightly says, “God is most glorified in me when I am most satisfied in Him” (ibid., p. 9, italics his). Thus if glorifying God is our highest aim, then finding joy and satisfaction in God must be our deliberate, lifelong, consuming pursuit. To the degree that we fall short of fullness of joy in God, we fail to glorify Him as He deserves.

The joy that God imparts to His people is the theme of Ezra 6. The chapter begins with the outcome in question. The work on rebuilding the temple had stopped for 16 years due to opposition from the people in the land. Then, under the ministries of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, the work resumed. But they barely got started again when Tattenai, the governor of the province that included Israel, confronted the Jews with whether they had proper permission to rebuild the temple. They told him about Cyrus’ decree. Because God’s eye was upon them, Tattenai permitted them to continue construction until word got back from the current king, Darius, as to what to do (5:3-5).
In chapter 6, Darius makes a search and eventually finds the decree of Cyrus in the government archives. He respects that decree and sends back a ruling that not only should the work go on, but also it ought to be supported by government funds. Thus the temple was completed on March 12, 515 B.C. The Lord’s people gathered to celebrate the dedication of this temple with joy (6:16). This was followed by a celebration of the Passover and Feast of Unleavened Bread “with joy.” Ezra explains the source of that joy: “for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel” (6:22). We learn:

**God’s aim is to give us great joy in Him and His sovereign ways.**

Joy and gladness in the Lord are not minor themes in the Bible. Moses told Israel that they should seek the Lord at the place He would choose, and that there they shall “rejoice in all [their] undertakings in which the Lord [their] God has blessed [them]” (Deut. 12:5, 7). Later he warned them, “Because you did not serve the Lord your God with joy and a glad heart, ... therefore you shall serve your enemies whom the Lord will send against you” (Deut. 28:47-48).

The Psalms are full of joy and gladness. God is the psalmist’s “exceeding joy” (Ps. 43:4). We are commanded, “Shout joyfully to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before Him with joyful singing” (Ps. 100:1-2). “Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous ones; and shout for joy, all you who are upright in heart” (Ps. 32:11). “But let all who take refuge in You be glad, let them ever sing for joy; and may You shelter them, that those who love Your name may exult in You” (Ps. 5:11). “In Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Ps. 16:11).

Jesus told the disciples to “rejoice that [their] names are recorded in heaven.” Then He “rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit” at the thought of God’s sovereign ways in salvation (Luke 10:20-21). “For the joy set before Him,” He endured the cross (Heb. 12:2). He told the disciples that He had spoken to them so that His joy may be in them, and that their joy may be made full (John 15:11). The reason that they were to ask in His name and receive was that
their joy may be made full (John 16:24). He promised that on judgment day, those who serve Him faithfully will be told, “Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21).

The apostle Paul commands us, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, Rejoice!” (Phil. 4:4). He told the Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:24) and the Philippians (1:25) that he was working with them for their joy. He listed joy as the second fruit that the Spirit produces in believers (Gal. 5:22).

The apostle Peter reported how those who believe in Jesus “greatly rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8). To a suffering church he wrote, “But to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation” (1 Pet. 4:13). John’s Revelation (19:6-7) pictures the saints rejoicing throughout eternity: “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready.”

I’ve only skimmed the surface of this theme in Scripture. But this should suffice to prove that joy in the Lord is not an optional or secondary matter for the believer. Rather, it is the very essence of the Christian faith, as Jonathan Edwards argues so convincingly in his “Treatise on Religious Affections” (The Works of Jonathan Edwards [Banner of Truth], 1:237). Or, as Alexander Maclaren comments on our text, “It is, in one aspect, the end of God’s dealings, that we should be glad in Him” (Expositions of Holy Scripture [Baker reprint], 3:301).

Our text unfolds five strands of the joy that God wants us to have as His people:

1. God wants us to know the joy of His providential care for us.

God’s remarkable providential care for His people underlies this entire account. Tattenai had sent his letter to Darius, expecting the king to send back orders to shut down this work at once. God’s providence is seen in the very fact of the king finding the decree of Cyrus from some 18 years before. They did not find it at Babylon, but rather in the fortress in Ecbatana, Cyrus’ summer residence.
God’s providential care is further seen in that Darius did not say, “I don’t care what my predecessor said. I command you to stop this rebellious work at once!” Rather, he not only told Tattenai to keep away from the project (6:6), but also to fund the project out of his tax revenues (6:8-9)! And, to add some motivation, he decreed that anyone who violated his edict should be impaled on a timber drawn from his house, and the house should be made a heap of rubble! He added the wish that the God who has caused His name to dwell there would overthrow any king or people who attempted to destroy this house of God (6:11-12).

God’s providential care is further alluded to in the mention that the building was completed according to God’s command, and also “the decree of Cyrus, Darius, and Artaxerxes” (6:14). Why does Ezra mention Artaxerxes, who reigned about 50 years after the completion of the temple? Probably he did it for political protocol, in that Artaxerxes was the reigning king when Ezra wrote. Since he had been kind enough to issue a decree for the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls, Ezra wanted to give him credit in case he read this account.

God’s providential working is directly stated in 6:22, where it is stated that the Lord “had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward” the Jews. It is unusual to refer to the Persian king as the king of Assyria. Perhaps Ezra did this to remind Israel that Assyria, Israel’s former enemy, had been conquered by the Persians whose king was friendly toward Israel (Stan Evers, Doing a Great Work [Evangelical Press], p. 64). Behind all these remarkable events was God’s mighty hand, turning the king’s heart like channels of water wherever He wishes (Prov. 21:1).

Do you see and rejoice in God’s providential care for you in every little as well as major thing that happens to you? Jesus told us that not one sparrow falls to the ground apart from the Father, and that He even knows the number of the hairs on our heads. Therefore, we should not fear, but should trust in God (Matt. 10:29-31). Since we are the living stones with which Jesus is now building His temple, the church, we can rest assured that He orders all things for our ultimate good. He will not discard or forget about His chosen people.

2. **God wants us to know the joy of His provision for us.**
Tattenai and his colleagues did not diligently carry out the king’s decree to fund the rebuilding of the temple out of his tax revenues (6:13) because they thought it was a great idea! They did it with all diligence because they didn’t care for the alternative of being impaled on a timber from their houses. God used the decree of a pagan king to provide the materials for the temple and even the animals and other items for the sacrifices (6:9). King Darius was trying to cover all his bases by having the local people pray to their gods on behalf of him and his sons (6:10). But God used the king’s religious superstitions to provide for His people.

The Lord does not usually use pagan governments as the main source of material support for His church. But however He provides, whether through the tax breaks we receive from our government as a charitable, non-profit organization, or through the generous giving of the Lord’s people, God is the one who provides for His church as we wait upon Him through faith and prayer. And when we see God’s provision, we should be filled with joy. In 2 Corinthians 8 & 9 we see Paul brimming over with joy in the Lord at the generous gift of the Macedonians for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. He points out how our generous giving not only meets the needs of others, it also overflows through many thanksgivings to God, resulting in God being glorified (2 Cor. 9:12-13).

We should rejoice daily not only in how God provides for the work of His church, but also in how He provides for our personal needs. Songwriter Wendell Loveless told of a 64-year-old woman who had been confined to her bed for more than 16 years. She was in constant pain and unable to move her limbs. Yet she was one of the most thankful people Loveless had ever met.

She rejoiced that God had left her a great blessing—the use of her right thumb. Her other hand was stiff and completely useless. But with a two-pronged fork fastened to a stick, she could put on her glasses, feed herself, sip her tea through a tube, and turn the pages of a large Bible. Although it took great effort, everything she did was with the use of just one thumb.

She once told a visitor, “I have so much to be thankful for.” When asked why, she replied, “Now that my sins are forgiven, I can lie back and daily drink in the great love of Jesus my Savior.” Asked if at times she became despondent, she replied, “I’m per-
fectly content to lie here as long as the Lord keeps me in this world, and I’m also ready to leave whenever He calls me.” (“Our Daily Bread,” May, 1993.) She knew the joy of God’s provision!

3. **God wants us to know the joy of productivity in our service for Him.**

The temple was finally finished, about 20 years after the foundation was laid, and just over four years after the rebuilding began again under the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah. There are differing views about the dimensions given in 6:3. These dimensions seem to exceed those of Solomon’s temple, which was 20 cubits wide, 60 cubits long, and 30 cubits high. But if this temple was bigger, it is hard to explain the disappointment of the old-timers when the foundation was laid (3:12). Since the length is not stated here, some think that the original text has been corrupted. Others suggest that these greater dimensions were the outside limits that Cyrus would support, but the actual building was much smaller, leading to the disappointment of some of the older Jews. But, whatever the solution, the temple was finished and the people rejoiced at its dedication (6:15-16).

While we can and should rejoice at the completion of a building project, we should find much greater joy when we see the Lord using us in the building of His spiritual temple, the church. There is great joy in heaven when one sinner repents (Luke 15:7, 10). As the father of the prodigal explains to the grumbling brother, “We had to celebrate and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found” (Luke 15:32). Paul calls the Philippian church his joy and crown (Phil. 4:1). He says the same thing to the Thessalonians, that they are his joy and crown of exultation, his glory and joy (1 Thess. 2:19-20).

I admit that there can be a sense of frustration in ministry to people, in that the “project” is never completed, and there are many setbacks. You can’t step back and say, “Ah, look at that person: Complete in Christ!” Or, “Look at this church: Harmonious, mature, fruitful—the work is done!” But while that is so, we can rejoice in the progress in godliness that we see in others’ lives as God uses us in ministry to them. We can rejoice in that our work in
the Lord is never in vain (1 Cor. 15:58). When we glorify God by bearing much fruit, our joy will be full (John 15:8, 11).

Thus God wants us to know the joy of His providential care for us; the joy of His provision for us; the joy of productivity in our service for Him.

4. **God wants us to know the joy of praising Him corporately.**

When the temple was completed, the people gathered and “celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy” (6:16). Their offerings were not nearly on the grandiose scale of Solomon’s dedication (1 Kings 8:63), but it was a sincere offering of what they had. Concerning the sin offering, Derek Kidner observes, “It was a confession of failure but also of faith. There was still atonement and still the covenant with the whole people—for this was the implication of the twelve sacrifices” (Ezra & Nehemiah, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries [IVP], p. 60, italics his). The appointment of the priests and Levites to their divisions and orders (6:18) shows their ongoing commitment to worship God.

Their observation of the Passover was a celebration of God’s gracious salvation, remembering how He delivered them from slavery in Egypt. The Feast of Unleavened Bread that immediately followed symbolized the holy fellowship of a redeemed people with their God. For us, these feasts are consolidated in the Lord’s Supper, where we remember that Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us. “Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor. 5:8).

Sincere and heartfelt joy must accompany our praise in order for the praise to be genuine. C. S. Lewis said that as he was beginning to believe in God, he could not understand the demands in the Psalms that we praise God. He didn’t see the point in this; besides, it seemed to him to picture God as craving “for our worship like a vain woman who wants compliments.” He goes on to show why he was wrong.

But the most obvious fact about praise—whether of God or anything—strangely escaped me. ... I had never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise.... The
world rings with praise—lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game….

My whole, more general difficulty about the praise of God depended on my absurdly denying to us, as regards the supremely Valuable, what we delight to do, what indeed we can’t help doing, about everything else we value.

I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation. (Reflections on the Psalms pp. 94-95, cited by Piper, Desiring God, p. 18.)

John Piper, who cites Lewis and credits him with helping Piper get clear on this, adds,

Pursuing joy in God and praising God are not separate acts. “Praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment.” Worship is not added to joy, and joy is not the by-product of worship. Worship is the valuing of God. And when this valuing is intense, it is joy in God. Therefore the essence of worship is delight in God, which displays His all-satisfying value (The Dangerous Duty of Delight [Multnomah Books], p. 24).

Spontaneous praise is good when you’re alone, but it’s better when you share the experience with others. Last Monday, Daniel Liba, our guest from Slovakia, Marla, and I sat on the South Rim of the Grand Canyon and watched a spectacular sunset. I would have enjoyed it if I had been there alone, but it’s better to share it with others you know and love. It’s the same with worship. It’s great to enjoy the beauty of the Lord in your private devotions, but it’s better to join with others and praise Him corporately. Finally,

5. **God wants us to know the joy of purity and obedience to Him.**

It is stated that Israel rebuilt the temple “according to the command of God” (6:14). They organized their worship “as it is written in the book of Moses” (6:18). Further, it is stated that “the priests and the Levites had purified themselves together; all of them were pure” (6:20). Not only the returned exiles, but also “all those who had separated themselves from the impurity of the na-
tions of the land” joined together “to seek the Lord God of Israel” by celebrating the Passover (6:21).

For there to be true joy in our worship, there must be holiness in our lives. We must separate ourselves from the impurity of the nations. It is hypocrisy that the Lord hates if we live “like the nations” all week and then put on a pious front to worship Him on Sundays. Contrary to popular opinion, purity of life and obedience to God do not rob us of joy. Purity and obedience are at the heart of true joy. Sin gives brief pleasure but lasting scars and pain. Obedience may be difficult at the moment, but it yields “the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Heb. 12:11).

**Conclusion**

C. S. Lewis said, “The ultimate purpose of God in all his work is to increase joy” (source unknown). He makes the radical suggestion that the thought that it is bad to desire our own good and enjoy it, is not a part of the Christian faith. He explains,

Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased (in Piper, Desiring God, p. 17).

Lewis was saying what John Piper preaches so clearly, that God Himself is the source of infinite joy, and that we should pursue joy in Him with all our hearts.

So I ask you as I ask myself, “How high is the pursuit of joy on your priority list?” God’s aim is to give us great joy in Him and His sovereign ways. Only when we have true joy in God will we glorify Him as we should.
Discussion Questions

1. What does biblical joy look like? Does it mean always being bubbly? If not, how would you describe it?

2. How can we have joy in God’s providential care when we go through trials that make it seem that He does not care? See James 1:2-5.

3. If a Christian is not involved in ministry of some kind, he is too self-focused. Agree or disagree? Give biblical support.

4. Why are pursuing God and pursuing our own joy not at odds? What would you say to a young person who said, “I want to have fun in life now; I’ll follow God later”?

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