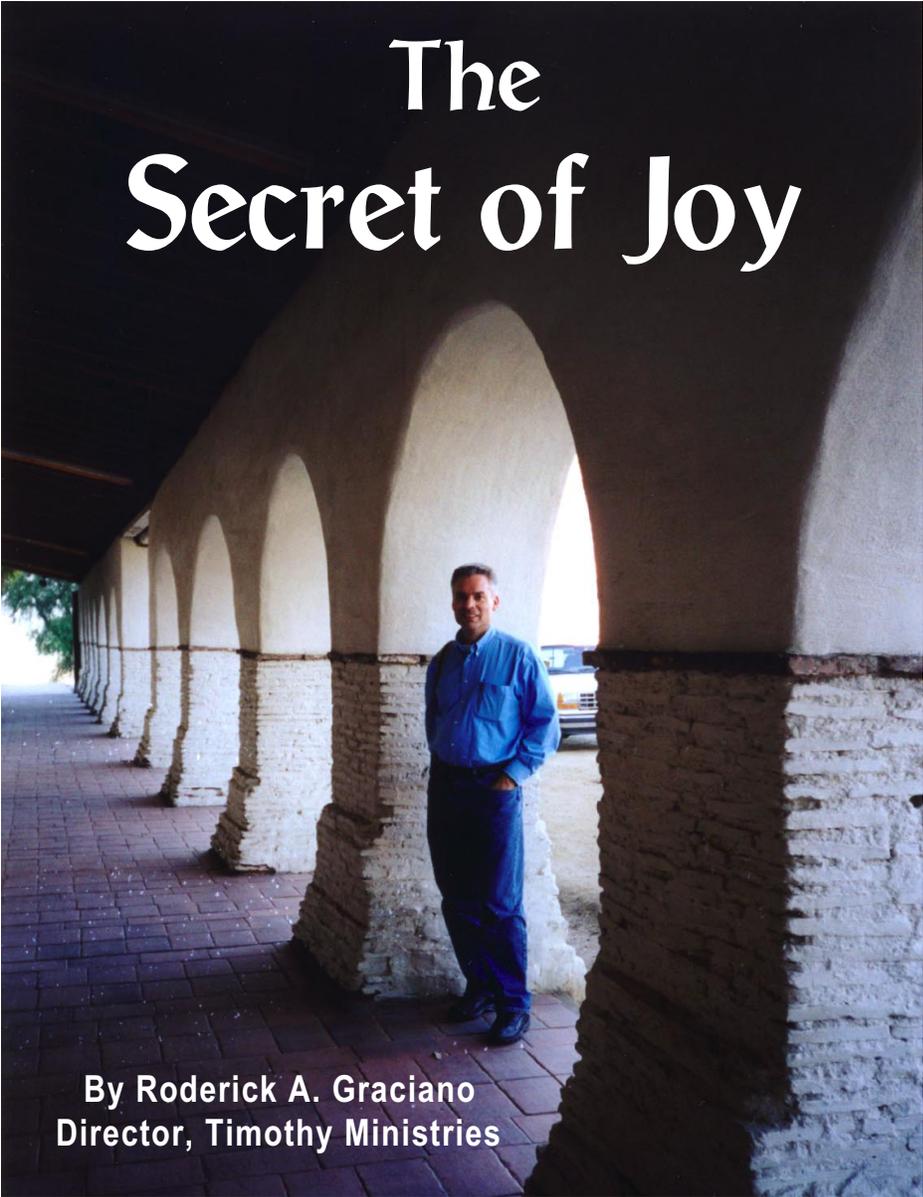




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Living by
faith means
believing
that God's
agenda is
better than
my own.



Years ago, a Christian friend complained to me: “Where’s all the joy? I thought Christians were supposed to be joyful; how come I don’t see any?” The words linger in my memory because they convicted me at the time. I’ve been a moody person, easily discouraged by circumstances and I had to agree with this lady that the Bible described a more joyful lifestyle than I or many of my friends were experiencing. I’ve pondered the problem now through years of studying the scriptures and living by faith. Here’s what I’ve learned:

Joy Is From the Lord

Joy is a special privilege for believers. Unbelievers can't experience it the way we can because real joy is something connected directly to the presence of God in one's life. As it says in 1 Chronicles 16.27, "Strength and **joy** are in *His place*." Similarly, the more familiar Psalm 16.11 says of God, "*In Thy presence is fulness of joy*". But just because we *can* have joy, does that mean that we should?

Joy Is God's Plan For You

If there is one thing clear in the Bible, it is that the Lord intends for His people to be joyful. My friend was well justified in her belief that Christians were supposed to be joyful. This was part of Christ's great prayer in John 17.13: "...these things I speak in the world, that they may have My **joy** made full in themselves." In Romans 14.17, the apostle Paul defined the Kingdom of God as a phenomenon inherently joyful: "for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and **joy** in the Holy Spirit." Paul also listed joy as one of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22. Joy is definitely part of God's plan for you. So what is it?

Joy Is What We Feel When We Win Against All Odds

Joy is a bubbling, hard to contain happiness of the kind you feel when something good surpasses your greatest expectations. It's the emotional experience of soldiers who win a battle against all odds (2 Chronicles 20.27; Psalm 27:1-6). It was the feeling of the disciples when they discovered that "even the demons" were subject to them in Christ's name (Luke 10.17). And it will be what we feel when we rocket out of our graves in glorified bodies, more alive than we've ever been, eternally victorious over death, the greatest of all enemies (Isaiah 26.19).

We have experienced joy when contrary to the condemnation of our own consciences and the expectation of judgment implied in God's holiness, we have instead experienced the forgiving grace of God and the end of our spiritual alienation from Him (See Psalm 51.10-12). And when the Lord returns we will experience the joy of having chosen well to trust in the rejected and condemned Judean carpenter, and of having invested well in an invisible kingdom (Matthew 13.44). (Remember the joy the disciples felt when their gamble of trusting in Jesus paid off after all: Matthew 28.8 and Luke 24.41. It was a fulfillment of the Lord's prediction in John 16.20, "...your grief will turn to joy.)

Essentially, joy is the emotional experience of *winning against all odds or beyond all expectations*. So how can we experience joy consistently if we don't win consistently? We can't. *We have to learn how to always win.*

How To Always Win

Last summer, my daughters and I took up the sport of tennis. We are still utter novices, but when I play with my more experienced friends I always win. As a matter of fact, I could win playing with world-class pros. The reason I can say that is because I play with a goal other than making the most points: I play for the workout. At my age, getting away from my desk for aerobic exercise is a critically important part of my routine. When my friends condescend to let me try to return their serves for an hour or so, I FEEL GREAT afterwards. I always win because I'm in it for the exercise, fresh air and fellowship and *that's what I always get.*

This illustrates the path to consistent joy: you just have to adopt the right goals in life so that you always win. If your goals in life are fortune and fame, personal comfort and affluence, you won't always win. But if you embrace God's agenda in place of your own, you will.

God has an eternal agenda for believers, a plan that He is fulfilling perfectly, immutably and *right on schedule*. **God always wins! To the extent that we get on board with His agenda, we likewise always win!** That is why James could say:

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have {its} perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. (James 1.2-4)

Since part of God's agenda is to produce endurance in us, to the extent that we embrace that agenda, we can rejoice in our trials knowing that through them we are winning a goal God has for us.

But let's get to the very foundation, to the very inner secret of joy. *To always win every day and in every circumstance of life, we must understand God's ultimate, underlying agenda for us.* That agenda is revealed in Romans 8.28,29:

Rom. 8.28 And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to {His} purpose.

Rom. 8.29 For whom He foreknew, **He also predestined {to become} conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren...**

Remember the story in Genesis 2 about God bringing all the animals to Adam, but finding no suitable companion for him? As much as we love our pets, I'm sure glad God created Eve so that we her descendants, like Adam her husband, could experience intimacy with a peer. Discussing one's dreams for the future or swapping memories from the past just doesn't work with bunnies and toy poodles. God knew that Adam needed a peer, but it required wounding Adam to produce that suitable companion. We discover in Romans 8.29 that God also seeks suitable companions for His Son. As in Adam's case, it required wounding Jesus to produce those companions, for while we shared humanity with Jesus we did not share His sinlessness. Now we who believe have been forgiven our sins and legally adopted into God's family (Romans 8.16), but the rebuilding of our fallen character remains to be accomplished. Without that inner rebuilding, we would remain unsuitable creatures to live as brothers and sisters of Jesus through eternity. God accomplishes that rebuilding by hammering us, straightening us and polishing us with *all* the circumstances of life. That is why "*all things... work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to {His} purpose.*" **God's ultimate agenda for us is to make us into suitable siblings for His Son. To the extent that we embrace that purpose, we win in every circumstance of life.**

Here's Where We Need Faith

This is where the rub comes for me. When my car has broken down, I have known that God was teaching me trust, dependency, humility, patience, contentment, etc., conforming me to the character of His Son and rebuilding my fallen soul. And when I have embraced that truth, I have experienced real laugh-out-loud joy. It is hilarious to realize that what looks like a bummer to others is really a gift from God and the best thing that could have happened to me at that moment. The problem is that most of the time I respond to circumstances in the light of *my* agenda rather than God's, and I become angry and discouraged at the demise of my plans. Nevertheless, I find that joy is as near to me as my willingness to receive it by embracing God's agenda rather than my own. And that's where I must exercise faith. It's easy to believe that Jesus exists and that Jesus is the Son of God who died for my sins and rose again. ***But do I really believe that God's agenda for me today is better than the agenda I cooked up for myself?***

If you lack joy, I suggest that you ask God for faith—*faith to embrace His agenda in place of your own*. Remember that God's plans are the only ones that always work out. "Many are the plans in a man's heart, But the counsel of the Lord, it will stand" (Proverbs 19.21). Only by embracing God's agenda can you always win. God is directing the circumstances of your life anyway, so why not make the most of those circumstances (Proverbs 16.9).

Who is really best qualified to plan your day anyway? If you will embrace God's agenda of character-building as a higher priority than your own agenda for the day, you can experience the joy the first Christians experienced, even when everything around them was going wrong (2 Corinthians 7.4; 1 Thessalonians 1.6).

How will you know when you've learned the secret of joy? It will be written all over your face (Psalm 43.4,5).

“Don't Talk To Me About Joy! You Don't Know What I've Suffered!”

I realize that some of you reading this newsletter have suffered great losses in the past, or are even now living with tremendous physical or emotional pain. You find it very difficult to believe, as I would in your circumstances, that the tragedies in your life are somehow “working together for good.” I don't claim to understand how all the bad things in life are going to turn out good. All I know is that Christians through the ages have testified to the experience of joy they have had *in the midst of tribulation*, be it in a Roman dungeon or in a cancer ward. I do believe that we can have joy in any circumstances, but if you are suffering today, I don't want to preach at you; I want to empathize with you the best I can and encourage you. If you would care to write us a note to let us know what you're struggling with, we'd like to pray for you and let you know that we care.

Isn't God's Ultimate Agenda For Us “To Glorify Him”?

Yes, but don't forget the rest of the answer in that great Westminster Catechism: “The chief end of man is to glorify God *and enjoy Him forever.*” While the ultimate purpose for everything in the universe is to bring glory to its Creator, I find that Christians suffer from a lack of perception as to the specific ways in which God intends for us to glorify Him. The greatest way that we will glorify Him is by becoming replicas—with regard to our character—of His Son. If we wish to glorify God in our lives now, the first thing we should do is say yes to His plan to shape us into godly persons through the challenging circumstances of each day. The end result will be our metamorphosis into suitable companions for Jesus, persons well-prepared to enjoy being with Him forever!

What About My Hypoglycemia?

As one who has struggled with physiological depression, I don't want to overlook the toll that low blood sugar, food intolerances and other health factors can take on one's sense of joy. Health problems often call for more than a new outlook on life or a deeper faith. We need to seek God's healing, and cooperate with Him by seeing a doctor or nutritionist if appropriate. We should find out what disciplines we can adopt to strengthen our physical bodies. If the health problem persists, however, let's realize that we can win in life even as we wait for God's deliverance.