

What is Joy?

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do
I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid.
-John 14:27

"Joy" is one of those words that people use quite often without much thought. We might define joy as extreme happiness or pleasure. And I think there is some merit to this, as most expressions of joy are associated with happy times and pleasurable experiences. In other words, all three expressions (joy, happiness and pleasure) refer to experiences that are agreeable to us, something we want to experience again. But I think this nostalgic look to the past is the problem in defining joy. One does not usually look at what these words mean in the present or future tenses. I think this is a bit of a problem, as Christians we are called to be living in the present while preparing for a Heavenly future (Matthew 6:25-34). One does not normally look at future experiences as they really will be, but rather thinks of a past experience and [justifiably] expects it to be just like it. Without realizing it, we associate feelings in their ideal form, not the form they actually take.

There are, of course, problems with looking at an emotion as it really is as opposed to what we imagine it to be. The most obvious one is that emotions are states of mind, which puts them on the same level with imagination. Imagination is inextricably entwined with emotions. We cannot separate happiness from pleasure from joy like we can separate, say, a fruit from a car. But we can use our imagination to apply value to things. This allows us to separate an apple from a pear or a Volkswagen from a Porsche. We can therefore use this value to separate pleasure from happiness from joy/peace (I'll be getting to the matter of peace shortly).

The next problem is that, unlike material things, we cannot share emotions with each other. The best we can do is try to describe them. Any empathy we experience is not from a truly shared experience, but rather a connection at a transcendental level. This both helps and hurts our understanding. The fact that we can connect at all this way suggests that there is a deeper existence than mere matter, and this fact will come into play later. But we cannot quantify these experiences, as they are subjective by nature. This leads me to my final point before getting to my main argument.

Words are equivocal, meaning they have different definitions. One cannot simply look at a particular sentence and decide that a particular word in it must always be understood in that way, or that no other word could fill its place. This is especially true in the vocabulary rich American English, something we take for granted. So, when I define these three words, somewhere in the millions of books that have been printed (and even in the Bible itself), these words will be used in ways that don't match what I say. But I am trying to explain a concept, not re-write the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

I will describe "pleasure" as the feeling one has when one is going through an experience that is agreeable to one's senses. "Happiness" is the agreeable feeling one experiences when one sees others having pleasure. "Joy" and "peace" are the feelings one experiences when one gives up control. When one gets a back rub, one experiences pleasure. When one gives a back rub, one may feel happiness. When one stops thinking about whether one is getting or giving a back rub, one is experiencing joy or peace. I'm sure that most of my gentle readers can accept my definitions of pleasure and happiness, but may find my definition of joy and peace strange. I ask the gentle reader to bear with me for a little bit longer.

Now that we have defined these words, let us look at how reality compares to the ideal. The reality of pleasure tends to follow the pattern of an addiction, especially if frequently experienced in excess. The more pleasure one gets, the harder it becomes to experience it again, and the less intense when experienced. Christian moral codes, far from being prohibitive killjoys, are actually designed to keep this addictive pathology from progressing. Far from preventing the Christian from having pleasure, Christian morals seek to ensure a lifetime of pleasurable experiences.

Happiness, as it requires others to experience pleasure, is vulnerable to the weaknesses of other humans. If one needs a fellow human to have a good experience, one is going to be disappointed. And a sense of abandonment is not the only problem with happiness, especially if one is always providing the pleasurable experiences for others. All too often, when parents feel their children are ungrateful for all that they have been given, the idea of happiness the parent expected from giving has met up with the reality of ingratitude. But with joy, something different happens.

Remember, I defined joy as giving up control. By giving up any preconceived idea of what the experience will be, one will neither become burned out by it, nor disappointed in the outcome. This is not to say that joy does not change with time (which is where peace comes in), only that it does not become corrupted. This is probably a hard thing to accept *prima facie*, so let me explain a little bit more on how this takes place and what it looks like in real life.

When one gives up control, one is by default giving something or someone else control. There are only three possible things one can give control to: another person, the universe, or God. I want to interject here that the first option, giving control to another person, is not my idea of joy. If the other person is agreeable, then this is pleasure; otherwise it is torment. If one gives up control to either the universe or to God, then true joy can be experienced. In both cases, one is recognizing that there is a deeper truth than the reality one experiences. I am sure my gentle Christian readers will not appreciate this insight, but both the atheist and the Christian accept a universal truth; the only meaningful difference (for this paper anyway) is that the Christian believes this truth is sentient. As I hope to show, it would do well for the Christian to embrace this common ground and use it to bring the skeptic to the faith.

So, true joy is to stop focusing on one's own truth and to accept that there is a bigger truth beyond oneself. But even if one accepts this proposal, this definition does not tell us how to find joy. Prayer and mantras are common methods of opening one's mind to the greater truth, but I believe everyone has experienced joy without trying. This is because, as long as one does not actively resist it, joy will find a way in. This will usually be in an unguarded moment and in an unexpected way. C.S. Lewis' autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, was based on this occurrence. It may be a child finding joy in flying when his father takes him for his first ride in a Cessna. It may be a woman who, after humiliating herself at a piano recital, comes home and plays her routine perfectly. It may be a golfer who stops struggling and simply lets the club swing. It may be a hiker who looks up and sees a sunset. It may be one meditating and finding oneself somehow moved. For Lewis, it was in reading pagan myths. Joy can be found in literally anything one can do, even from suffering and dying (as so many martyrs and other saints have proven).

And this is why I think it is important to accept, at least initially, the idea that a skeptic can find joy. If one could only find joy through man-made attempts such as prayer and meditation, then the idea of a non-sentient truth would have some merit. But the fact that joy seeks the smallest opportunity so it can manifest itself is something one associates with a willful effort, not random chance. The skeptic, as happened to Lewis, can be moved to believe that ultimate truth is sentient once they experience

ultimate truth. To alienate the skeptic over the idea of ultimate truth will never end well for the would-be evangelist.

But I still have one more loose end to tie up. I have talked about how pleasure, happiness and joy all change over time, and I have frequently listed joy and peace together. But while I showed that pleasure leads to something like addiction if abused, and happiness can turn to resentment if one is not careful, true joy leads to peace. The child who felt joy in his first plane ride will not compare that feeling with how he feels now that he is flying every day as a commercial airline pilot, yet flying never gets old. The child moved from the joy of his first flight to finding peace when he is in the air.

This is because peace, the one and only Earthly reward Jesus promised us (as shown in the opening scripture), is a place, and joy was the street sign. When we are in contact with this greater truth, peace is what we experience. Joy is really the indication that we have found the greater truth. And just like we don't need a sign to find a favorite vacation spot on future trips, the more often we experience the truth, the less important the notification of its presence is. If one found joy in a stamp collection, then one needs only to return to old stamps to find peace. One no longer needs an indication that stamps are where one can lose oneself, the philatelist already knows the way.

Finally, I will offer a word of warning. Joy and peace come from letting oneself go. Just like a favorite vacation spot can be spoiled by destroying it, one can lose peace by abusing whatever it is that brought one peace. If one treats joy as pleasure, then it will break down just as pleasure does. And this is where it is important to know the difference between the *reality* of emotion and the *ideal* of emotion. If listening to the ocean roar on a Florida beach brought one joy, and one goes back to feel this joy again, one will be disappointed. Joy came from letting go of oneself while listening to the roar of the ocean. One needs to return to the beach with the expectation of letting go of oneself, not to relive a "high."

So, based on this line of thought, joy is a tool God uses to help us find Him. It is a means of teaching us how to let go of ourselves for something greater than ourselves. We use what brought us joy as the means to return to this greatness, which is God. When we are with God, we have peace. As long as we accept peace for what it is, and not what we want it to be, we will find an ever abundant source of it.

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