

FIGHTING FOR JOY

I'm back from sabbatical! I want to thank you, my church family, for such a wonderful gift. These past two months have helped refill my soul, reconnect me with the Lord, and have some space and time to really enjoy my family. I can't say thank you enough!

I look forward to sharing a more in-depth report at the monthly Business Meeting on Sunday, August 15th at 6:00 p.m. The plan at the moment is to have an ice cream social at the Multi-Purpose Center (bus barn) after the meeting.

I say it is the plan at the moment because Covid-19 has made a serious comeback these past several weeks. The new "Delta" variant is getting past the vaccine and is highly contagious. It has impacted many in our church family, including our staff's families. We are continually in prayer for all who have been sick or have had a loved one come down with this virus.

If you're like me, this unwelcome return of Covid-19 has challenged my joy. It's not the only thing. There are lots of things that seem to evaporate the joy out of our lives. Financial woes, marriage struggles, parenting challenges, work issues, compromised health and more. Being joyful is a command of Scripture. The Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the church in Thessalonica this brief command: "Always be joyful." (1 Thessalonians 5:16, NLT). We know this is not easy to do, don't we?

One of the great lessons I believe the Lord wanted to teach me these past two months is that sometimes (a lot of times?) you have to fight to maintain a joy-filled life. How can we do it? Here are some things I've learned (or re-learned!) over the summer:

1. Spend quality time with God in the Word. Do so without distractions (put the cell phone away!). Read the Scriptures, meditate on them, memorize them, pray them (Psalm 119:15-16). The Bible is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16) and is, therefore, alive and active (Hebrews 4:12). It is how God speaks to us and when we hear His voice we are comforted, if not delighted (Proverbs 15:23). You can begin by going through all the passage of Scripture mentioned in throughout this article.
2. Don't leave that time with God until the darkness lifts, even just a little bit. As you steep yourself in His Word and claim His promises, you can also pour your heart out to Him for He cares for you (1 Peter 5:7). Remind yourself that you are a child of God (), adopted through the grace of Jesus into the family of God, and you have a home in heaven where all wrong things will be undone. Your past is wiped clean, your present is secure and your future is bright and beautiful.
3. It's not all up to you. You don't have to go it alone for God is always with you (Joshua 1:7-9). You do not do the work by yourself, but are working side-by-side with the Lord Jesus Christ (Matthew 11:28-30). You don't have to rely on your own strength, but can receive the strength of God for the challenge at hand (Isaiah 40:27-31). You are not limited by your own wisdom, but can ask for and generously receive the wisdom of God (James 1:2-8).

4. Worship God through song (Psalm 150:1-5, Ephesians 5:19). Really pay attention to the lyrics. Let them turn into prayer. Let the combination of sound and meaning minister to your soul.
5. After Job went through all that he did, he desired to see all of it, including his hope in God, to be written down, preserved for an eternity (Job 19:23-27). Like him, you can process our thoughts, feelings, and experiences by journaling. You can also journal about what you've read in Scripture and write out your prayers. This practice has been very useful to me the last two months.
6. Take time off on weekends and vacations. God does not need to rest, but he did so after creation in order to set for us a pattern of rest from work so that we might rest in Him (Hebrews 4:9-10). So, put away work and distractions and focus on God and enjoy His blessings. A simple formula might look like this: Pray + Play = Sabbath (I got this from Eugene Peterson).
7. Do something strenuous. Get some exercise. Working out will help you manage stress/anxiety and improve your mood. I often remember that the Apostle Paul did say that physical training is of some value (1 Timothy 4:8)!
8. Do something you enjoy, particularly in nature (hike, bike, camp, star gaze, walk in the park, go to the beach, etc.). Over and again we read in the Psalms how creation draws us to our Creator (see Psalm 19:1, 65:9-12, 95:3-5, 96:11-12). Our trips over the summer have involved the beauty of God's nature and it has reminded me of His creative goodness. We, as His creation, are part of that creative goodness!

So, friends, if you are going through a season where joy is difficult to find, may I encourage you to fight for the joy of the Lord. Remember that you are in a season that will eventually pass. Wait on the Lord. Give Him time to lift you out of the discouragement. This might take longer than you want and expect. But deliverance is coming (John 16:33, Romans 8:35-37)!

With much love,
Pastor Matt