

The Joy of His Salvation

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One of the most poignant passages in all of Scripture is Psalm 51. Its superscription tells us that David wrote it after Nathan came to him and convicted him of his sin with Bathsheba, but even without that additional bit of information, we could probably have figured out its context anyway. The psalm is among the most beautiful in the entire Bible, but it is also among the most heart-wrenching because of how clearly it reveals David's anguish at his evil.

In this psalm, though, one of the verses that gives us the most insight into why David sinned is Psalm 51:12. David here is crying out for something he used to have and now misses terribly—the joy of the salvation of God. Although he doesn't say so explicitly, this is most likely the real reason why he fell so spectacularly. Throughout his life, even when he was fleeing from Saul, even when he was having to feign insanity in the court of the Philistine king, David rejoiced in his relationship with God. Nothing mattered to him more than pleasing God, because nothing gave him more pleasure. Ironically enough, though, once God established his kingdom and gave him rest from his enemies, that joy that had carried him through so many hardships began to dissipate. David most likely didn't even realize it, but he was drifting away from His Creator. This newly joyless David was the man that Satan was able to tempt and conquer.

Of course, this experience is hardly unique to David. Every Christian here remembers the joy of the day that we obeyed the gospel, how thrilling it was to have our sins washed away and to dedicate our lives to Christ. I remember thinking that my life was never going to be the same again. However, for all of us, that initial enthusiasm dissipates. Sometimes, it is replaced by a quieter, more mature joy, but sometimes, it is replaced by apathy instead. That apathy places us in tremendous spiritual danger, so let's see this morning what we can do to restore the joy of His salvation.

Understanding the Problem.

As we explore this topic, instead of jumping right on into the solutions, it's best if we spend some time first grasping the problem. As part of this, we must recognize just how common it is for Christians to lose touch with the joy of God's salvation. Look, for instance, at the way that Paul describes his life in 2 Corinthians 1:8-9. We tend to think of Paul as this invincible uber-Christian, but in reality, he was every bit as human as we are. At times during his ministry, when things seemed to be going well, Paul was riding high. At other times, though, when the gospel didn't seem to be having the effect that Paul wanted it to, he could become discouraged and even, as we see here, despairing.

The point is that every Christian, no matter how devout, is going to experience spiritual highs and spiritual lows. Paul did, Peter did, even Jesus did. When we hit a rough patch in our spirituality, then, and it's gotten harder for us to make ourselves go to services or do the things we know we ought to do, that's not a sign that there's something unusually wrong with us, or that we're doomed to fail as disciples. In fact, we should expect to go through those difficult stretches now and again, simply because we are imperfect people living in an imperfect world. That's just part of our walk.

However, even though we should recognize that drifting away from the joy of our salvation is common, that doesn't make it any less serious. It's not the kind of problem that we should shrug our shoulders about and allow to continue. The Hebrews writer warns us about this in Hebrews 10:36-38. There are a lot of churches out there that teach once-saved-always saved, that just as soon as we pray the sinner's prayer or whatever, from that point on, we are no longer in danger of losing our souls. That's a very pleasant belief, but it has the fatal flaw of not being true. Any one of us can fall away and be eternally lost. We have to endure until the end, because if we shrink back from doing God's will, He isn't going to be pleased with us. What matters is not where we are now, but the course we choose going forward.

If we are no longer joyful about serving God, that puts us in particular danger of choosing the wrong course. There are a lot of things I know I should do that I don't do. I know I should get up at 5:30 every morning and go running. I know I should devote my free time to redoing the bathroom instead of playing Medieval: Total War. I know I should eat healthy food instead of yummy food. However, I don't do any of those things, and the bottom line is that I don't do them because I don't enjoy them and don't want to do them. If we lose the joy of God's salvation, then Christianity ends up on that same unpleasant-things-to-do list, and we will probably neglect it too.

Restoring the Joy.

However, if we've already become apathetic about following Christ, we don't have to give up hope. Just like it's possible to breathe new life into a dying marriage, it's also possible to restore the joy of His salvation in our hearts. One of the most important tools in this restoration process is **PRAYER**. Consider the example of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane in Luke 22:39-41. If ever there was a low point in Jesus' spiritual life, that was it. He knew that He was about to die for the sins of mankind, and He desperately didn't want to. In that miserable hour, He needed more strength and resolve to do what He needed to do, and He sought that strength and resolve through prayer.

Even if we aren't facing our own personal garden of Gethsemane, prayer is every bit as indispensable for us. Admittedly, I don't have as many miles on the odometer as a lot of brethren here, but I have yet to see a weak Christian who was in danger of falling away who had a strong prayer life. Any relationship is based on communication, and our relationship with God is no different. If we stop communicating with Him, or if we stop reading His word to us, it's inevitable that our love for Him is going to lessen. On the other hand, the more consistently we speak with Him, the closer we're going to grow. That connection will be enough to maintain our joy even in difficult times.

For many Christians, one of the biggest obstacles to developing this rich prayer life is that they think they don't know how to pray. They hear all of these long, elaborate, five-paragraph-essay prayers in church, and they think that prayers have to be like that, but they're not five-paragraph-essay kind of people, and so they don't pray at all. Thankfully, God doesn't require our prayers to sound like they came from the pen of Shakespeare. Look at Romans 8:26-27. As long as we're determined to pray, God doesn't care if our prayers come out in a stream of semi-coherent mush. The Holy Spirit and Jesus are able to sort through all of the gibberish and present to God what we meant to say the whole time. The point is that as long as we aren't praying for sinful, evil things, the only way to pray wrong is not to pray at all. If we struggle with it, the best thing to do is to stop worrying and start praying. We'll be amazed at the results if we do.

Prayer will take us a long way back toward the joy of God, but it isn't sufficient by itself. **OBEDIENCE** is every bit as important. Jesus explains why in Matthew 12:43-45. Charles Darwin was wrong about a lot of things, but when he said that nature abhors a vacuum, he was right. In all of my gardening endeavors, I've learned about this the hard way. I've got some flowerbeds on my property that are just total weedbeds. The previous owner didn't maintain them, and I haven't gotten around to redoing them yet. I can take my trusty bottle of Roundup and spray those weedbeds to death, but if I do that, I know I'd better be prepared to re-work the bed right then. I might have killed off every weed in it, but if I wait till next year to plant, there will be a whole new crop of weeds to replace the ones I sprayed.

That's the way it is in our spiritual lives too. We can invest huge amounts of effort in getting rid of the sin in our hearts, but unless we have something positive to replace the sin with, after we let our guard down, it's just going to come right back. It's not enough to be constantly on the defensive against the devil. We have to be looking for ways to put him on his heels, and the best way to do that is to fill the empty spaces of our lives with things that are righteous.

Jesus tells us, in fact, that this kind of working for God is certain to restore our joy in Him. Let's read together from John 15:10-11. The truth is that just like there is misery in sin, there is joy in obedience. As human beings, we are designed to obey God, and we take pleasure in actively doing good. I've never been to see a shut-in, or helped a brother out, or had a family from church over for dinner and said to myself, "Now that was a waste of time." I always enjoy those things, even if, and perhaps especially if, I didn't want to do them when I started. I am quite certain that the most joyful Christians in this congregation are the most active Christians in this congregation. The more we push ourselves to be active, the more we make room for righteousness in our lives, the more we will learn how richly God rewards those who dedicate themselves to His service. If we want to restore our joy, we can be sure to find it in His work.

The third strategy that we can employ to get that joy back is spending time with **OTHER CHRISTIANS**. If we look at the word in a top-down way, if we think about the kinds of things that God commands us to do and why He commands us to do them, it's very striking just how group-oriented a religion Christianity is. It's all about interacting with other people and especially interacting with our brethren. Basically, in His church, God takes a whole bunch of people from a whole bunch of different backgrounds, shoves us all together, and commands us to be closer to each other than we are to anyone else. He does this because He knows that we are vulnerable apart and strong together.

This was true even for the supposed uber-Christian Paul. Look at how he describes his hopes for his visit to the church in Rome in Romans 1:11-12. Paul planned on making the trip so that he could encourage them, but he also anticipated that they would encourage him as well. The point is that even the most renowned gospel preacher, even the most dedicated elder, still needs to spend time with other disciples. Paul never says so, but I suspect he knew that if he didn't have that recharge time with his brethren, even his own faith was prone to run out of energy. Sadly, that's exactly what we see in nearly every Christian who falls away. They fall away precisely because they've allowed themselves to become separated from the group. They've lost that love that binds them to us and to God, and so they drift off.

The Hebrews writer, of course, spends more time discussing this drifting off than any other Biblical writer, so it's not surprising that he offers a very group-based solution in Hebrews 10:24-25. As just about all of us know, this verse teaches that the encouragement process begins in the assembly. If we want to maintain or re-awaken the joy of our salvation, we need to be here every time the doors are open. That's no guarantee of success, of course, but if we aren't here, that's a guarantee of disaster. This is the place where we can interact with one another, be taught by one another, and be built up by one another, and all of us need all of those things. Of course, even though this joy-affirming process begins in the assembly, it shouldn't end there. We need to consider ways to associate with one another throughout the week, not just here. In Hebrews 3, the author instructs us to exhort one another daily, and we should look for ways to put that passage into practice. It's certain that the more time we spend with one another, the more joyful we become.