

WE NEED TREAD ONLY LIGHTLY UPON THE SORROWS OF THIS WORLD, FOR THERE IS A JOY BEYOND OURSELVES,
A JOY BEYOND OUR CIRCUMSTANCES,
A JOY BEYOND EVERY ENCUMBRANCE.

MAN—THAT IS, ALL OF MANKIND—HAS BLESSED ITSELF with a counterfeit emotion it calls “joy.” But the joy man has created is often riddled with sarcasm, cynicism, revenge, arrogance or, at best, silliness.

As he so often does, man has settled for an inferior product; in his ignorance, he has taken his own low humor as the supreme example of ultimate joy. Thinking only he knows best, he has decided that small experiences such as laughter, feeling good, and happiness are synonymous with real joy.

But there is only one authentic joy, and it is God-created. It is an experience of His devising, and every related man-created experience or emotion pales in comparison.

The believer’s joy is a sometimes powerfully quiet, sometimes riotously ecstatic exultation based on the presence of God in a life. That presence is called the Holy Spirit, that blessed companion who is the engine of our joy. God’s joy come down, translated by the Spirit, transcends any earthly pretender as it weaves itself through every temporal experience, every moment, every part of a life.

An Active Presence

God’s joy is not just present, but *active* in our sorrows; it is the force that holds our bearing in the storms and earthquakes that challenge our relationship with Him.

You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.

1 Thessalonians 1:6 NIV

His joy surrounds and upholds, lifting our fears above the fray, our expectations beyond ourselves.

You turned my wailing into dancing;
you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy,
that my heart may sing to you and not be silent.
O Lord my God, I will give you thanks forever.

Psalm 30:11-12 NIV

The casual believer can readily understand the value of God’s joy in a life when trying times hit; no sane person can be against having an escape from trials. But the same casual believer may not so easily understand that in God’s economy, trials are meant to actually *produce* the joy.

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, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

James 1:2-4

God’s joy, like His trials, is a deep and powerful thing—bearing nothing but confusion for the worldly man and mystery for the casual believer, but incalculable peace to the one who dares to plumb the depths of His riches.

Happiness may bring momentary pleasure, but true joy always points to God.

God alone has pure
joy; it is other-worldly,
but comes to man in
mystic union with Him.

Beyreuther, Finkenrath

Rising

I could have stayed in bed, but then I would have missed the opportunity to say “good morning” to God through the voice of a cardinal.

The early morning air is clean and crisp. The new-summer sun shoots golden rays through the trees from its low angle, spotlighting every detail around me. The green carpet of grass, so dark and thick from the generous spring rains, wears its morning shawl of sparkling dew like a rainbow of diamonds. The green leaves of the trees move softly back and forth in the gentle stillness, outlined by the sunlight against the dark blue of the clear dawn sky.

An irritated doe, insulted by my breach of protocol, snorts at me from the pond and trots off into the safety of nearby brush. But the birds in joyous chorus sing their greeting from the overhead branches. A brown thrasher limbers his chords, running through his lyrical repertoire, filling the cool morning air with strains that Mozart would have copied down. The wrens add their rhythmic counterpoint, bouncing notes up and down the scale like spring water splashing over small pebbles.

I could have stayed in bed. The night had been pleasantly cool, and I was comfortably ensconced beneath several layers. No one would have faulted me a few more minutes of blissful slumber before beginning the day's work. But from two floors down I could hear the distant clattering of a mouse trying to free himself from one of the traps I had set in the canning room on the first floor. I rose from my warm bed and descended to inspect the traps. A solitary captive glared back at me through the clear plastic flap that was the only barrier between his imprisonment and freedom. His wide black eyes spoke volumes of his annoyance over being so rudely inconvenienced, and his small round ears twitched nervously, sending me a semaphore message, “*Get me out of here this instant!*”

I cross the soft rise that takes me from the back of the house to the old west burn pile—now overgrown with weeds and reducing down into mulch, now only a home to birds and mice, and anything else needing shelter.

From the old burn pile I look down into the valley just beginning to catch the light of the sun rising behind me. The hillsides toward the west are bisected—the top rows of trees painted gold by the sun, while those further down still rest in the shaded gloom of pre-dawn light. Deeper still, down in the hollows where cattle munch their breakfast and farmers begin their daily toil, pockets of fog drape the valley in a mystical, *Brigadoon* cloak, blanketing the curving rows of corn and soybeans.

Life bursts at the seams in this wet year. Every living thing—trees, grass, flowers and vegetables, cows and sheep, moths, cockroaches, june bugs, possums and snakes—everything this year is extravagant in its vitality. Healthy green is the predominate color of the foliage, everything bursting with the juices of life.

Even mice. The anxious one in my hand vibrates his fear combined with anger, reminding me that he considers himself in an unpleasant situation and still waits to be released. I pass the hole where once stood the old cherry tree, toppled last year by its aged rot. I pass by the trellis buried beneath the huge mound of wisteria; erected to support the flowering vine, the vine is now the only thing holding up the fragile trellis.

My mudders glisten from the wet grass as I cross up the rise that will take me to the new burn pile on the edge of the north field. The large circular clearing, its soil blackened and gray with ash, is all that

is left of the towering accumulation of last year's and this spring's work clearing branches and brush. With the old burned away, the pile will now begin again, as we set to the never-ending task of maintaining the property.

I pause to look out over the rolling, sloping terrain of the small valley over which our land rests. I inhale the clean, bright air. It is the beginning of a new day—a day never experienced before. What lies ahead? What new discoveries will brighten the way? What wonderful things will be woven through this day's hours?


In my hand, the mouse vibrates his displeasure, so I move beyond the burned clearing, over the mowed grass to the taller grass of the open field that slopes down toward the gravel road. I rotate the plastic trap so that the flap that has been covering the opening swings down. In a flash the mouse is free, shooting from the trap like a bullet, flying through the air to land in the tall, wet grass. And then he is gone.

Into His Presence

There is a daily rhythm to the songs of birds. Just before dawn they begin their chorus, rising in number and volume with the rising of the sun until, in a moment like this, the morning quiet is overwhelmed by the antiphonal choir perched in the branches of the trees. Then, as the day warms, and the sun rises higher toward its zenith, the chorus decrescendos, punctuated only by the occasional burst of song or squawking rebuke.

For now the chorus is still in full voice. As I turn back toward the house, I pause beneath the row of poplars that divides the front lawn from the north field. I lift my gaze up the trunk of the dying tree that I will soon be cutting down for kindling, and there in its white, skeletal branches sits a male cardinal, gloriously crimson against the green of the leaves and the deep blue of the morning sky. He hops about in the high branches, and just when I expect it, he lifts his head and sings.

And in that moment—that bright, crystalline moment—I am with God. There is no orderly, systematic logic to explain my thoughts; if handed a pen, I could not write them down. But there in the crisp morning chill, with dawn spreading its light across the wakening land and a solitary, winged worshiper lifting his praise, I, too, am lifted into His presence.

It is a groaning, un-worded joy that overtakes my being. It is a tiny sampling of the unbounded joy I will one day experience in the Father's actual presence, as I join the chorus of all the redeemed around the throne. It is a small piece of that same joy encased in the crown I someday will be given—a crown containing a joy I cannot wear, but must cast back at His feet. For the joy is not mine to keep, but only to share for a moment with all of His creation. 

...the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying:

“You are worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory and honor and power;
For You created all things,
And by Your will they exist and were created.”

Revelation 4:10-11 NKJV

Next week: Afternoon and Evening