

Psalm 126 (NRSV)

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,
we were like those who dream.

²Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
and our tongue with shouts of joy;
then it was said among the nations,
“The LORD has done great things for
them.”

³The LORD has done great things for us,
and we rejoiced.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵May those who sow in tears
reap with shouts of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping,
bearing the seed for sowing,
shall come home with shouts of joy,
carrying their sheaves.

1 Thessalonians 5:16–28 (NRSV)

¹⁶Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸
give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the
will of God in Christ Jesus for you. ¹⁹Do not
quench the Spirit. ²⁰Do not despise the words
of prophets, ²¹but test everything; hold fast to
what is good; ²²abstain from every form of
evil.

²³May the God of peace himself sanctify
you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and
body be kept sound and blameless at the
coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one
who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

²⁵Beloved, pray for us.

²⁶Greet all the brothers and sisters with a
holy kiss. ²⁷I solemnly command you by the
Lord that this letter be read to all of them.

²⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be
with you.

Seeking Joy

I don't know that there is a better word to describe the life I seek than a life filled with *joy* – the joy of a loving relationship with God, with my wife, with my children and family, with my friends, with all of you at St. Andrew. The joy of a job well done; the happiness of purpose and fulfillment. The celebration of all that is good and wonderful about life. This is what I seek, but I've learned that such joy can be so elusive.

Quite a few years ago, an article in the *New York Times* caught my eye: “The Futile Pursuit of Happiness.” The author traced the work of several researchers on our search for happiness. What they found is no real surprise. We humans are dreadful when it comes to imagining how we'll feel about something in the future. As the author put it, “we overestimate the intensity and duration of our emotional reactions.” More simply stated, that new BMW isn't going to make you as happy as you thought it would and any boost it does give to your happiness won't last as long as you thought it would. Too many folks are going to learn that lesson yet again this Christmas.

The same is true on the downside; emotional devastation was less intense and shorter-lived than people expected. Mistakes we make in understanding what to expect from a raise or a new car or a new house lead directly to poor choices. We think we know what will make us happy or content or joyful – but we don't.

The truth is that it is easy for us all to spend most of our lives looking for joy in all the wrong places. So, where do we turn? Or, better put, to whom do we turn?

God has given us the greatest gift of all. But what does it mean to live with this gift?

You've acknowledged and admitted your need for the gift. You've even accepted the gift, or at least you've stopped rejecting it. And now you get to enjoy the gift. It is yours. What will you do with it? Or better, what will the gift do to you?

And just what is the gift offered to us in the Christ-child? Simply put, it is reconciliation with God. It is the putting-back-together of a relationship torn apart in the Garden of Eden and by our own injustices. It is eternal life with God and others; life filled with love, peace, and fellowship. It is a life to be enjoyed in the very biggest sense of the word. It is all the goodness and delight that the Creator-of-All can pack into a

moment – and it is all yours. However wonderful you imagine such a life to be, your imagining will be little more than a pale reflection of what awaits.

Living the “with God” life

The writers and editors of the *Renovare* Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV) have focused their work on helping readers understand what it means to live with God as told in the pages of Scripture. Here’s a bit of what they have to say about this life:

The Bible is all about human life “with-God.” It is about how God has made this “with” life possible and will bring it to pass. In fact, the name “Immanuel,” meaning “God is with us,” is the title given to the one and only Redeemer because it refers to God’s everlasting intent for human life – namely, that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God. Indeed, the unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life with-God as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus. We might call this “The Immanuel Principle” of life.

The “with-God” kind of life that we see in the Bible is the very life to which we are called. It is, in fact, exactly the life Jesus is referring to when he declares, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10, NRSV). It is a life of unhurried peace and power. It is solid. It is serene. It is simple. It is radiant. It takes no time, though it permeates all of our time.

This dynamic, pulsating, with-God life is on nearly every page of our Bible. To the point of redundancy we hear that “God is with” his people: with Abraham, with Moses, with Esther, with David, with Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos and Micah and Haggai and Malachi, with Mary, with Peter, with James and John, with Paul and Barnabas, with Priscilla and Aquila, with Lydia, Timothy, Epaphroditus, Phoebe, and a host of others too numerous to name.

But, you ask. My bills aren’t getting paid. My mom is sick again. My teenagers seem to drift further and further away. My life sure doesn’t seem a continuous stream of joy and peace and love. All true. For all of us. Accepting the gift does bring us into God’s eternity, but we also still live in the present world of trouble, sin, and tragedy. We live “in between” the arrival of God’s kingdom (another way of speaking of God’s eternity) and its full consummation. Life with God is ours and there is still much work to do. Psalm 126 is a case in point.

Psalm 126 is about life’s ups and downs – from the “up” past of the Jews’ return from exile, to the present “down” of their disappointment with the post-exilic life, to the “up” future of God’s promised restoration.¹ But look closely at the psalm. How much is actually said about the present “down.” Granted, there are tears and weeping (verses 5 and 6). But where is the petition for help? The anger over what seems to be God’s unkept promises? It is like there is an entire middle stanza missing from the psalm. Indeed, if we didn’t know the truth about the Jews’ return to Judea, we might have little clue there was any “down” at all – but there certainly was.

Perhaps the psalmist wants us to understand that though the people are experiencing a present “down,” their eyes and their hearts are focused upon their past blessings and their future hopes. They choose to see the blessings in their own lives and to see the good in others. It is not that they are being “unrealistic.” The people of God certainly do not see the world through those famed rose-colored glasses. But we do see the world in the light of God. And that changes everything.

So what does Paul say to the Thessalonians: “rejoice always, pray without ceasing.” Now, do any of us actually do these two things? I’m pretty sure the answer is no. But “living with the gift” means that we press on, confident that God

¹In 587/86 BC, the Babylonians burned Jerusalem and sent tens of thousands back to Babylon to live in exile. After about fifty years, King Cyrus of Persia overran Babylonia and allowed the Jews to begin returning to the burned out ruins of Jerusalem. The phrase “restored the fortunes of Zion” refers to this return from exile. Yet, the exiles’ dreams were not realized. In this psalm, as in the book of Joel, the psalmist confronts the disappointing circumstances in Judea. The Jews may have come back from Babylon, but they were neither free nor prosperous.

is working in us and through us, as we pursue the joy and the communion with God that will be ours fully when Jesus returns and his kingdom is fully consummated. In his commentary on Thess. 5:16-28, N.T. (Tom) Wright puts it this way:

As with the letter as a whole, so this conclusion looks ahead to the time when Jesus will at last be once again personally present. The many New Testament pictures of what will happen on that day are, for Paul, not so important as the effect which Christian hope should have on the believer. Knowing that there is coming a time when every knee will bow at the name of Jesus (Philippians 2:10) doesn't mean that the Christian can sit back and take it easy. He or she must learn to bow the knee to him in the present, in holiness and adoration, and to make his coming rule known in the world.²

We live our lives now in the sure light of what is to come. Is the "with-God" life an easy one? No, being holy (which means becoming more like Christ, more "with-God"), is hard work. Yet, we know that in this work the Spirit of Christ strengthens us and encourages and lifts us up.

Living with God means that even in the face of troubles and tragedies, we can find a deep-seated joy. We can, as Paul puts it, rejoice always. The New Testament scholar, Leon Morris, writes:

The injunction *Be joyful always* is at first sight a little surprising coming from one who had had to suffer as much and as continually as Paul. But he learned that affliction and deep joy may go together (2 Cor. 6:10; 12:10), and he rejoiced in tribulations (Rom. 5:3; Col. 1:24; cf. Acts 5:41; 16:25). So he counsels perpetual rejoicing to a suffering church (cf. 1:6). The note of joy is often struck in his other letter to a Macedonian church, that to the Philippians (cf. Phil. 4:4). Indeed, few things about the New Testament church are more remarkable than this continual stress on joy. From an outward point of view there was little to make believers rejoice. But they were 'in Christ'; they had learned the truth of his words, 'no-one will take away your joy' (John 16:22). Now joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22; cf. Rom. 14:17); it is not something Christians work up out of their own resources. The various derivatives of joy occur with startling frequency throughout the New Testament. The word for 'grace', for example, is from this root, as are one of the words for 'to forgive', one for 'to give thanks', and another for 'gifts of the Spirit'. New Testament Christianity is permeated with the spirit of holy joy.³

So it is with prayer. Just as joy doesn't necessarily imply pleasure, so prayer doesn't imply spoken or even thought words. As J. B. Lightfoot, the 19th century British theologian and bishop wrote, "It is not in the moving of the lips, but in the elevation of the heart to God, that the essence of prayer consists."⁴

Living with the gift of the Christ-child and the reconciliation with God accomplished for us by Jesus' faithfulness is living every moment of every day in the light of God's presence, confident and joyful in the sure knowledge that just as Jesus defeated sin and death, so he shall come again. This world can throw much at us, but nothing, absolutely nothing, can separate us from God's love and the eternal life he has given.

So . . . be joy-filled in all things, be in continuous communion with God, and set your mind and your heart on the things of God and the work of building for his kingdom.

² Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: Galatians and Thessalonians*. "This second edition copublished in 2004 by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, and Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY."

³ Morris, L. (1984). *Vol. 13: 1 and 2 Thessalonians: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (103–104). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

⁴ The quote is from Lightfoot's commentary on 1 Thessalonians.

Living with the Gift: the right place

What is church? Why are there churches at all? Is there a church because we need organizations that can bring people together to worship, to minister to one another, to study, to serve, and to do mission? Is the church defined by what we do as we seek to accomplish God's purposes? In other words, is the church the means to an end . . . or is the church the end in itself?

Simon Chan, a professor at Trinity Theological Seminary in Singapore, helps us to see that the church, the larger body of Christ of which St. Andrew is one small part, is not merely an organizing tool. He says, "The church does not exist in order to fix a broken creation; rather, creation exists to realize the church. To be sure, the church's coming into being does require the overcoming of sin, but that is quite different from saying that the problem of sin is the reason for the church's being. God made the world in order to make the church, not vice versa."¹

"God made the world in order to make the church." Think about that for a minute. To put it another way, God made the world so that God could form a people to love and who would love God, even at the cost of his own Son. It staggers my heart and it humbles me.

The church does not consist of buildings, not even the beautiful sanctuaries such as our own. Rather, the church consists of all those who have faith in Jesus Christ. When we rise each week to recite the Apostles Creed and affirm our belief in "one holy catholic church," we mean the universal church, the body of Christ – to which all Christians, all those who have faith in Jesus Christ, belong. God had once dwelt in the temple of Jerusalem, but, beginning at Pentecost, God dwells in and among his people. It is the people of God themselves who are joined together in Christ, a new creation and new humanity, growing into a holy temple, the temple to which God has returned. What a remarkable claim we make, that God's very presence dwells in us, the church – the people of God.

For twenty-five years, there has been a congregation called St. Andrew in the holy, universal church. For twenty-five years, we have been on a journey, understanding that God created us to be his. We are a large community and we have all the blessings and challenges that come with size, but we must never lose sight of the fact that we are not merely an organization. Rather, we, as the body of Christ, are the very presence of Christ.

Thus, this place is where our search for joy and our life with Christ begins. The church, not a mountaintop, is the place of joy and hope. It is here, in the fellowship we share with God and one another that we can ground our lives in the joy and hope of being God's beloved.

1. from Mark Galli's article, "Stopping the Cultural Drift," in the November 2006 issue of *Christianity Today*.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. First, what do we mean by joy? Is it the same thing as happiness? If not, how do they differ in your mind? How would you describe joy to someone? What illustrative story could you tell? What do you think the apostle Paul means by "joy" in Thess. 5:16? How about the writer of Psalm 126?
2. How do we usually seek joy or happiness? What stories do you have about times when you've thought something would make you happy – but instead proved disappointing or fleeting? I once bought an expensive piano because I somehow had decided that it would improve a very unhappy marriage. (Crazy but true!) As parents, most of us try to teach our own kids that a new dress or a video game won't bring them lasting happiness, but I wonder how much we take to heart our own teachings. What have you learned about finding joy in life?
3. Describe an occasion or two in your life when you experienced most experienced the presence of God, when you most felt that God was with you in the moment. Were any of these occasions in time of trouble or anxiety? If so, why do you think that would be?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. *The Advent Readings are all drawn from the Common Lectionary. You might ask yourself why these Scripture passages were chosen for Advent.*

Monday, Zephaniah 3:14-20 A song celebrating God's vindication of Israel	Tuesday, Isaiah 12:2-6 Praising God for our salvation
Wednesday, Matthew 11:2-11 Jesus and John the Baptist as fulfillments of Old Testament expectations	Thursday, Philippians 4:4-7 Paul urges the believers to rejoice for the Lord is near.
Friday, James 5:7-10 James urges to believers to be patient even as they struggle with the troubles in their lives, for God is both compassionate and merciful.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

