

Training Session 25 - Becoming: Joyful

Objective

To become joyful people who see Jesus in all of life

Key Scriptures

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18; Philippians 4:7; Psalm 118:24; James 1:2-4

INTRODUCTION

What type of person are you becoming? That's the key question. Are you becoming the person you want to be and, more importantly, God wants you to be? BLESS rhythms, and the mentoring process in general, are designed to produce people who are **BECOMING** more joyful, happy, thankful, humble, servant-hearted, faithful, hopeful, purposeful, and free. Imagine a picture of yourself growing each day in your character in these ways. We're beginning a new series entitled, "Becoming," which focuses on the type of person that we are all becoming. In this training session, we're going to focus on becoming more joyful. No matter where you are now, the goal is that this time next week you will find yourself a bit more joyful. And then this time the following year you will find yourself significantly more joyful and so on.

To introduce this concept of an ever-increasing joy (with some ups and downs to be sure), let's go back to the 80s. If you are a fan of 80s music, you remember Bryan Adam's iconic song entitled *Summer of 69*. In the song, Adams laments the end of the summer of 69 because it meant his band in the garage would all go their own separate ways and so will his summer girlfriend. He croons...

Those were the best days of my life
Back in the summer of sixty-nine, oh
man, we were killin' time, we were young and restless
We needed to unwind
I guess nothin' can last forever, forever, no

Bryan, you're wrong. Great song, but you're wrong. Joy, rightly understood, can last forever. It seems impossible, doesn't it, to experience an *everlasting* joy when we consider all the pressures, pains, and fleeting pleasures of life. Conservative or liberal, democrat or republican, old or young--we all want an everlasting joy for ourselves, our children, and our friends, but it seems elusive. While it isn't easy, the Bible says it is possible, which is what we'll explore today.

JOY IS AN ONGOING CHOICE TO SEE, TRUST, AND THANK JESUS IN ALL OF LIFE

Here is the first thing to know about joy. If you want to know and experience an everlasting joy, then you will need to perpetually choose joy. Over and over, millions of times, in the blessings

and blunders of life, choose joy. God doesn't suggest joy as an option for a few of us. He commands joy as a step of faithfulness for all of us. "Sing for joy" He exhorts us (Psalm 47:1). "Rejoice in the Lord **always**. I will say it again: Rejoice" (Philippians 4:7). On and on we could go with God's persistent commands to rejoice, *always!*

Bradford and I are trying to invite our kids to join us on a journey of perpetually choosing joy by waking them up daily with the same refrain, "This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it" (Psalm 118:24). No matter the occasion or the obstacles in front of us, the day is ripe for rejoicing if we can muster the courage to make a million decisions of joy when the headwinds and tailwinds of the day begin to blow.

Regardless of the direction of the wind, God calls us to "Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in **all circumstances**. For this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." All circumstances. Not some. All means all and that means: All. The good circumstances and the bad ones. Nowhere else in the Bible is God this explicit about His will for our lives. We often wish He would be explicit when it comes to His will for our lives with jobs, spouses, and other things, but in this case, God couldn't be more clear. With clarity any elementary school child could understand, He says, "Be joyful always, in all circumstances. This is my desire for your life."

How is that working out for you? Would your close friends and family members describe you as a fundamentally joyfully person? Why is it that so many Christians are so joyless and we are perfectly fine with it? I once heard Francis Chan reflect on this and say, "We don't take this as a serious command. When was the last time you ever confronted someone over not rejoicing?" Chan goes on to point out that we treat God's command to rejoice always as somehow different than his other commands. "It's just not practical. No one can live this way," we say defensively. Francis Chan encourages us to consider a different response that would go something like this, "Yes, but when God commands us not to murder, we don't see it as impractical or optional. It just is. We confront people over having an affair, why not over lacking joy." Why not? Probably because in our minds it feels like God is commanding us to leap the Grand Canyon by asking us to rejoice always. But is He? After all, what is He really asking us to do when He commands us to "Be joyful always"?

Well, the answer to that question depends on how you define joy. No. Check that. It really doesn't matter how you or I define joy. What matters is how God defines joy. What is He really asking us to do? If He is giving the command to be joyful always, then His definition of joy is the one we should be most interested in.

The answer to that question is in John 16 where Jesus gives a heart-to-heart talk to His disciples and promises them one thing: trouble! What? "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). He guarantees trouble, but He also says, "Don't fret. Take heart. Take courage. I've overcome it."

Great, but how does that help me and how does it relate to God's definition of joy? Here's how. Like the disciples, we have lots of trouble, and but we also have One who has overcome and will overcome. He wins. Always. Even when it looks like a defeat in the world's eyes, He has a way of working it out for our good and the good of the world (Romans 8:28). He turned arguably the

worst injustice in human history (the cross) into the very thing that all Christians now rejoice in because it opened the floodgates of God's forgiveness for us.

But how does this help with a Biblical definition of joy? Because shortly before Jesus reassures us that He will overcome any trouble that faces us, He said to His disciples, "Now is your time of grief, but I will **see you** again and you will **rejoice**, and **no one will take away your joy**." So much there. First, notice the central thing that brings about an everlasting joy. It is implied and you can miss it. Why are the disciples rejoicing? Because they **see** Jesus. He is telling them about a time period of three days after the cross when they wouldn't be able to see Him because of his death, but then through the Resurrection they would see Him and joy would explode in their hearts like the grand finale of the 4th of July fireworks show. And it wouldn't stop! No one would be able to take this joy or steal it. Therein, my friends, lies the key to joy. Seeing Jesus.

Why does seeing Jesus set off fireworks of joy? Here's why. In the Bible we find out that "the eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light" (Matthew 6:22). What we see determines the light (or darkness) of our entire countenance. When you are at work and you can't *see* a purpose to what you are doing, work feels like drudgery. When you are in a marriage and you can't *see* it ever getting any better, you are tempted to call it quits. Positively, when young people *see* a way to a better future through role models and mentors, they begin to work hard toward that future and hope and joy spring up. Youth pastors often quip, "Show me your child's friends and I'll show you your child's future." Why? Because children need to see faith and courage and wisdom in action all around them. "Without **vision**, the people perish" (Proverbs 29:18). Vision is powerful.

The critical first step toward joy, therefore, is vision. Specifically, it is making an ongoing choice to **see** Jesus (who is joy personified) with you in all of life. Why? Because "In your presence is fullness of joy" (Psalm 16:11). His presence brings not just joy, but fullness of joy. His presence carries with it all of His sovereign control, all of His overcoming power, and all of the fruit of His Spirit (including joy!). In His presence, we find a refuge from any storm (Psalm 46:1) and we meet One who can control any storm (Mark 4:39) and work it for our good, His glory, and His purposes (Romans 8:28). This is why we're called to "fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Hebrews 12:2). He's the author and the perfecter. Therefore, the key is seeing Jesus in all of life.

Sometimes it is easy. Sometimes it is not. Picture any number of scenarios. Standing in a long line at the DMV (ugh), stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic, receiving a cancer diagnosis, getting a job promotion, watching a sunset on the beach--regardless of the circumstance, a choice is required. The pleasurable moments require the conscious choice of *seeing* the gift coming from the Giver's hand as He delights with us; the painful moments require the conscious choice of trusting that He is present, He is good, and working our pain for good as He weeps with us; the pedestrian moments require a conscious choice to see Jesus in the midst of the mundane as He endures with us.

Now we are getting close to a **Biblical definition** of joy. **Joy is an ongoing choice to see and trust Jesus in all of life.** It isn't enough to simply see Jesus. We must make an ongoing choice to **TRUST** Jesus. 1 Peter 1:8-9 says that we "believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy." Our part is belief; His part is to fill us with an inexpressible and glorious joy. Belief is another word for trust. We choose to trust Him. And the tense is present progressive, which means it is ongoing. We have to make a million ongoing choices to trust. Our trust triggers His joy. The same thing is found in Romans 15:13, "May the God of hope fill you with all **joy** and peace as you **trust** in Him." Trust triggers joy. And it is an ongoing trust, as we go. It's like having your hand on the trigger of a gun. The gun doesn't fire until you pull the trigger. In glorious fashion, our trust triggers a rifle shot of God's joy into our hearts. As the old hymn says, "Trust and obey, for there's no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey." On repeat!

But there is one last thing: thanks! **Joy is an ongoing choice to see, trust, and THANK Jesus in all of life.** Seeing Jesus with eyes of faith is the first step. Trusting Jesus with a heart of faith is the second step. Finally, thanking Jesus with words of faith completes the process of joy and actually brings joy to its fullness. Consider the story of the ten lepers. 10 were healed; only one came back to give thanks. In that moment, Jesus makes a point that I missed reading this text over the years. Curiously, after the one healed leper comes back to thank him, Jesus says, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:19).

He is already well. Right? Wrong, at least partially wrong. He's well, but he's not fully well. It's like the gas tank of his car is $\frac{3}{4}$ full. There's more wellness of being for the taking, there's more joy to be had. The leper only received the fullness of joy (the topping off if you will) when he came back to give thanks.

Think of it like the elusive triple crown in horse racing. When you win the first leg of the triple crown at the Kentucky Derby, joy abounds. It's a big, big deal. That's seeing Jesus. Seeing Him brings great joy. But there are two more legs of the Triple Crown, each bringing monumentally more joy. David completes the triple crown of joy when he says (or sings), "The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him" (Psalm 28:2). First, David has chosen to **SEE** the Lord as his strength and shield throughout King Saul's persecutions (which is most likely in view here); second, he doesn't merely see the Lord in his life, but he **TRUSTS** him in his heart; finally, the result: -his heart leaps for joy! But for his heart to reach the pinnacle of joy as it leaps upward, giving **THANKS** is required, so David says, "With my song I praise him." Praise or thanks--either work to top off your joy. They're synonymous and either can be used here, which is why many translations use thanks. As David give thanks, the triple crown of joy is complete and his heart leaps for joy..

C.S. Lewis helped me see how praise and giving thanks tops off or completes our joy in college when I read an essay entitled *A Word About Praising* that forever changed my life, as it has untold numbers of people. Wisely, Lewis noted that "praise almost seems to be inner health made audible." I love that phrase...inner health made audible, which is precisely what we're after. Lewis described what study after study confirms today--giving thanks and health are connected. Now I'm not saying we can give thanks for the daily bacon double cheeseburger and

expect to improve our health, but I am saying that giving thanks *can* and *will* radically improve our health.

The benefits are seemingly limitless. Not only will become healthier, we'll also become the kind of people others like to be around. C.S. Lewis observed "the humblest, and at the same time most balanced and capacious minds, praise most, while the cranks, misfits, and malcontents praise least." All the while, our joy is growing as we give thanks. "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because *the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation.*" Giving thanks takes joy to a new level that we wouldn't have otherwise reached, even when we struggle to articulate our gratitude.

I experience this all the time with Bradford. We go on dates and often we'll share the things we're thankful for in one another. Sometimes I am sharing specific things that I am grateful for and other times I am sharing general virtuous character traits that I see being lived out in her and through her over the years. Either way, joy surges as we verbally express our gratitude. Thanks completes joy.

Imagine, Lewis muses, if we were able to utterly "get out" in poetry, or music, or paint the upsurge of appreciation which almost bursts in you? Then indeed the object would be fully appreciated and our delight would have attained perfect development. Maybe this is why God commands us to give thanks so many different ways and so many different times in the Bible. In any way, shape, or form, we might just "get it out." Maybe this is why 9 lepers were healed (and presumably joyful) but only one had a faith that truly made him well. It's no secret. Only one gave thanks, and it made all the difference. Inner health became audible and joy was complete...through giving thanks.

CHOOSING TO SEE JESUS BY TRUSTING HIM IN SUFFERING

What this means is that we have to make a million decisions to see, trust, and give thanks for Jesus in all of life *by trusting* Him with every area of life. Let's consider a few of those areas, beginning with one that is hard for most of us. My cousin (Maury) is 34 years young and just showed me how to do this. Maury's Dad divorced his mom when Maury was 8. At age 25, Maury found out his mom had ALS and he walked with her through a long, degenerative slide into death. In October of last year, his 33 year old wife, who was 7 months pregnant with their third child, was diagnosed with stage four breast cancer.

When he and Nikki (his wife) first went to the doctor and received the diagnosis, they went from their appointment to a celebratory dinner at one of the finest restaurants in town. It seemed like an odd time to celebrate, but they choose to see Jesus in all of life, even suffering most of us would dread. They took seriously His command to rejoice always. In particular, they quoted to each other a specific application of this command found in James 1:2-3, "Consider it **pure joy** whenever you face trials of any kind because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."

Stage 4 cancer. Pure joy? Most of us certainly wouldn't consider this pure joy. They did and it made all the difference. Don't get me wrong. They weren't celebrating cancer. They were celebrating the presence of Jesus in cancer. His power. His authority. His ability to heal and

restore and work this for good, come what may. They knew He was at work and they were choosing to “let perseverance finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (James 1:4). Not lacking joy. They chose to see Jesus. Their trust triggered joy, and no one could steal it from them.

Not even death. Sadly, her cancer spread rapidly. In February, I received the dreaded call, “Stephen, you better come quick. Things have gone south really quick.” I spent a few of the most treasured days of my life with my cousin at the hospital. 10 or so of us gathered around her bed worshipping, praying, trusting, hoping, and hurting together. Never have I experienced anything like it. Maury never left her side. His Bible was almost always out and he was almost always holding her hand, very often weeping and very often worshipping. He was choosing to trust and choosing to see Jesus in the struggle with them. His trust triggered a joy that was mingled with sorrow. Joy and sorrow were inseparable bedfellows.

Mistakenly, many Christians and non-Christians alike believe sadness is the opposite of joy. It is as if joy and sadness are oil and water. As a result, they short circuit the grieving process in themselves and others and even experience guilt for feeling sad. There is no space in such a polarized world for “mourning with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15). Paul, however, describes the life of a follower of Jesus as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” (2 Corinthians 6:10) because He knows a joy broad enough to encompass all of life, including the hard and dark places filled with sorrow.

Sorrowful, yet always rejoicing. Let those words sink in. If we can be sorrowful, yet **always** rejoicing, then it means we can experience sadness and joy at the very same time. How? Because sadness isn't the opposite of joy. Despair is the opposite of joy. A person in despair has lost their **vision** for how things can ever change. A person in despair has lost sight of Jesus. Like Peter, their eyes are off Jesus and firmly fixed on the wind and the waves and they are sinking into the pit of despair (Matthew 14:22-33). So that's the task if you feel yourself slipping into the pit of despair. It is to make a conscious choice to take your eyes off your problem and fix them on Jesus. With eyes on Him, most assuredly, your suffering will produce “perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint” (Romans 5:3). Joyful hope doesn't leave you disappointed in the pit of despair. Joyful hope pulls you out, but to hold onto the rope of joyful hope, you have to make the choice to take your eyes off the problem and fix them on Jesus, trust him, and give thanks. Joy really is *the ongoing choice to see, trust, and give thanks to Jesus in all of life*. In this case, it is the ongoing choice to see, trust, and give thanks for Jesus as Emmanuel, as God with us, healing, comforting, redeeming, and working this “light and momentary trouble” into an “eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen” (2 Corinthians 4:17). Joy is choosing to see, trust, and thank Jesus in all of life. Period.

Let's go back to my cousin and close out the story. Painfully, Jesus chose not to honor our requests to heal her on this side of the Jordan, but oh how He has healed her on the other side of the Jordan. Faith has given way to sight. Everlasting and inexpressible joy have escalated for Nikki to a level unimaginable for those of us who still stand on Jordan's stormy banks.

On the other hand, all of Nikki's friends and family members were (and are) painfully sad. My cousin and I stood shoulder to shoulder with our hands lifted high in worship. With tears streaming down our faces, we chose to worship a God who gives and takes away. We experienced firsthand a joy co-mingled with sadness. We were sorrowful, yet rejoicing in Christ. My cousin choked back tears and said, "It is appropriate for us to have our hands lifted high in worship because Nikki and I wanted to bookend our journey with cancer in joyful worship. We considered it pure joy when we got the diagnosis and we consider it pure joy today that Jesus is with us in this. We celebrate His goodness in 33 years of Nikki's life today and we celebrate the Rock on whom our life is built that will carry us through this storm." He chose to see Jesus. Great sadness and great joy. Together. Trust triggered the God of hope filling Maury with an inexpressible and glorious joy and it will continue to do so today.

CHOOSING TO SEE JESUS BY TRUSTING HIM IN ALL OF LIFE REQUIRES TRAINING

Choosing to see, trust, and give thanks for Jesus at the level my cousin displayed requires a tremendous amount of training. Often, I find myself walking with people walking through huge amounts of pain. Some have trained for it, others have not. Many show up in my office spiritually obese. They have not done any spiritual training. The only running they have done is running from God. Then life slams them. Now, facing a crisis of suffering, they find themselves needing to run the equivalent of a 6 minute mile in a marathon. As much as I would like to help them, I can't help them run the 6 minute mile they want for the grueling race in front of them. The sheer reality is that if you want to run a 6 minute mile over the course of the marathon of life, you have to train. There is no other way. "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training" (I Corinthians 9:25).

BLESS rhythms are the training we are asking you to do. Train every day by beginning your day with the Bible (B). Train every day by making a million decisions to love God and people (L). Train every day by choosing to eat with the purpose of friendship and mission (E). Train every day by choosing to be generous with God's resources (S). Train every week by choosing to rest from your work one day in six (S). These rhythms are choices. Repetitive choices create habits and habits shape who we become. In a very real sense, joy training is what we're doing. If you want to become a person who displays an ever-present and everlasting joy, it won't happen by accident. It will happen intentionally through millions of choices to see Jesus in all of life.

Discussion Questions

1. What did you find most impactful in the training session?
2. Ask a close friend and your spouse (if you are married) two questions, "Would you consider me a fundamentally joyful person? Why or why not?" "Am I more joyful now than I was five years ago? Why or why not?"
3. Read John 16:22,33. Discuss the Biblical definition of joy we gave in the training session. How does seeing Jesus trigger joy?
4. Read Philippians 4:7 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. What areas of life do you struggle to rejoice in and what areas do you do well in?

5. Read Ps. 28:2. Discuss this quote by C.S. Lewis: praise almost seems to be inner health made audible. What role does giving thanks play in our joy?
6. Choosing to see, trust, and thank Jesus in all of life requires training. How have you seen this in your life?
7. In your experience, do most Christians believe joy and suffering and tears co-exist? What does the Bible have to say about this?

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DmZcXSORV0M>