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Faithful Witness in Suffering and Joy

Jeffrey A. Oswald

I have learned, over the years, not to ask people to close their eyes, even for a moment, while I'm speaking, but I do need to risk a moment of quiet reverie here with you this morning. If you can do this without closing your eyes, all the better. Either way, I want you to recall the moments in your life when you feel you truly experienced joy. I will not ask you to reveal these moments to anyone, so please do not set about compiling a list fit for small group sharing. In fact, I want you to forget that you are attending a theological symposium at the moment, forget that you are on a seminary campus, forget who's setting next to you, and forget who's standing here speaking. When in your life have you experienced a moment of true joy?

Now, let me ask you, how do you know that what you experienced was joy? What were you searching for as you reviewed a lifetime full of experiences? What is joy?

Do We Know Joy?

Are We "Joy Experts"?

I began work on this paper where I begin work on most research projects: in our library. For this topic, however, I was not only interested in finding resources that might help me prepare this presentation, I was also curious to see how resources on "joy" are arranged, so I did a "subject search." As I expected, and you probably would too, the largest number of entries under "joy" in our library came in the subdivisions having to do with "Christianity" and "Biblical Teaching" on joy, but, by totaling all of the entries under "joy," I came up with a list of about twenty-two titles. I have it on good authority that our library collection consists of roughly 280,000 titles. What with nearly one out of every 13,000 books devoted to our topic, it's clear that our seminary is all but obsessed with the idea of joy.

All of this, of course, is leading to a consideration of the question of whether or not we are qualified to speak about joy—at all. Do we, theologians, pastors, teachers, deaconesses, elders, lay people—do we Christians even know what joy is, and do we deserve to be heard when we speak about it?

One response to the results of the catalog search could and probably should be

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that we don't need shelves full of books to know what joy is because we have the one book that truly and reliably reveals joy to all who seek joy between its covers. The Bible is filled with passages on joy, not only commanding us to rejoice but also describing the nature of joy and the things that bring joy.

Joy comes from the Lord. It is the Lord who fills the psalmist's heart with joy (Ps 4:7), the Lord who is our exceeding joy (Ps 43:4). Joy is a fruit of the Lord's Spirit (Gal 5:22), for the Lord's presence brings joy (Ps 21:6)—where he is there fullness of joy will be found, at his right hand are pleasures eternal (Ps 16:11). His testimonies are joy (Ps 119:111), and his word is the joy, the delight, of our hearts (Jer 15:16). The announcement of the birth of God's Son is good news of great joy (Lk 2:10), and the coming of the message of salvation in this Son fills people with great joy (Acts 8:39)—and it fills all heaven with joy, too (Lk 15:7). The reign of God is joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). This list could go on and on, for, as both Pollyanna and our synodical president know, there is “joy and rejoicing everywhere” when we open our Scriptures and read.¹

The Bible speaks of joy in more concrete, sensuous—and sensual—terms as well. Not only is there joy to be found in the fellowship of believers, in “going up to the house of the Lord” (Ps 122:1), but there is joy in “eating the fat and drinking the sweet” (Neh 8:10). Wine gladdens the heart (Ps 104:15), as does a bountiful harvest (Is 9:3)—the fertile pastures, meadows, and valleys themselves sing for joy (Ps 65:12–13). Nor are the forests to be out sung (Ps 96:12). There is joy in the growth of a strong nation (Is 9:3) and joy in the conception of a child (1 Sam 2:1). There is happiness to be found in keeping the law (Prv 29:18), just as there is in showing generosity to the poor (Prv 14:21). A man finds delight in the body of his wife, and in love there is intoxication (Prv 5:19). The Lord fills our mouths with laughter, and our tongues sing for joy (Ps 126:2). We rejoice with joy inexpressible (1 Pt 1:8).

At least, that's what the Bible says, but does having all of this in our Bibles really make us “joy experts”? Is reading about joy in the Bible the same as knowing joy? Are our churches filled with the fullness of joy? Are our homes? Are our hearts?

Are We “Joy Experts”?

The world has certainly rarely thought of us as “joy experts.” Friedrich Nietzsche said of the Christians of his day that they would have to sing better songs if he were to believe in their Redeemer—and they'd have to look a lot more redeemed.² Are we as joyless as our Scriptures are joyful? In his summary of Christian teaching as he understood it, Lin Yutang (林語堂) wrote, “All in all, there is still a belief in total depravity, that enjoyment of this life is sin and wickedness, that to be uncomfortable is to be virtuous.”³

In my first draft of the outline, I raised the question of whether we are “joy experts” or “joy exorcists.” Rather than certified teachers of all things joyful are we instead “the exorcist” who suddenly appears in silhouette at the entrance to the world's party and casts out joy as if it were an unclean spirit, leaving the formerly joyful thrash-

ing about on the floor and ready to throw themselves into the fire? After some additional thought, however, I decided not to pursue that question. I'm sure I would not have had to search long to find the movies, books, blogs, and cartoons to show the popularity of such a view, but I think the picture of the Christian as the "joy exorcist," as the "cosmic killjoy," is a caricature. Although it could be helpful to ask from what features of the Christian face the caricaturists have drawn their inspiration, that picture, like all caricatures, would show itself in the end to be mostly exaggeration. I regarded as more worthy of exploration together here the question you see on your outlines: Are we not "experts" but "expats" when it comes to joy?

"Expats," short for "expatriates," can refer to those driven or banished from their native land, but it more commonly refers to those living outside their native land for any reason. The mere suggestion of the metaphor suddenly calls to mind a rather different set of passages from Scripture that have to do with joy: "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and the end of joy may be grief" (Prv 14:13); "All joy has grown dark; the gladness of the earth is banished" (Is 24:11); "The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning" (Lam 5:15). And it probably doesn't help our argument that the Greek word connected to the root for our English word joy is not found in the Bible, but more on vocabulary in a moment.

There, then, is a kind of one-two punch that, according to our opponent anyway, knocks us out of contention for the title of "joy expert." We do not know joy ourselves, nor will we allow the world its own joy. We are like Pharisees that shut the kingdom of joy in people's faces; we neither enter ourselves nor do we allow anyone else to enter. For it is a rare Christian book on joy, I discovered, that has anything to say about the world's joys other than to note their vanity, deception, emptiness, and sinfulness. Why should the world care what we have to say about joy, even if we made the effort to find the words or the way to speak to them about it?

Are we "joy expats"? "Joy exiles"? Is that what the narrative that shapes our identity and guides our living has become? That we once, long ago and far away, inhabited a paradise of joy, but that our sin "shivered and blackened all that," but that Jesus came to suffer and die that we might have the promise of joy again, and that we look forward once more to a time of joy restored? Has David's heartsick plea to God to restore to him the joy of salvation become in our praying of it a prayer for the last day? What of us second- and third-generation exiles who have no experience of our ancient homeland, no memory upon which to build the hope of restoration? "Joy," we tell ourselves, "comes in the morning," but will the morning ever come?

In 1970, Martin Franzmann published a small collection of prayers entitled *Pray for Joy*.⁴ I use it on almost a weekly basis, so I've come to know the collection of prayers it contains fairly well. As I was thinking about this paper, it suddenly struck me that there is no prayer in the book called "Pray for Joy" or even "A Prayer for Joy." Joy is mentioned in the title of two of the thirty-one prayers, "To Find Joy in Life's Trials" and "Joy in the Gift of Exaltation," but, ironically, the word joy does not appear in the second of those prayers. I can find the word only three times in the whole book, once in the prayer that we "joy in our trials,"⁵ once in a paraphrase of Job 38:7 ("when the

sons of God shouted for joy”),⁶ and once in a prayer that Christ would give a newly married couple his “bounteous wine of joy.”⁷ That hardly seems enough to justify the title of the collection. Franzmann’s preface provides at least a clue to help in solving this mystery, and may even suggest a hint of double-entendre. He explains that praying constantly and giving thanks in all circumstances are not only God’s will for us, those activities are “a great help toward fulfilling that injunction which for us melancholy myopics of the 1970s is the most difficult of all: ‘Rejoice always.’”⁸ Franzmann’s well-chosen title, then, suggests the double truth that the church must always be praying that God would grant her joy and that joyful people will never stop praying, never cease to give thanks, because of their joy.

We “melancholy myopics” of the twenty-first century are in the same situation. Hardly experts on the subject of joy, we can at least become students of joy and supplicants of joy, and someday, perhaps, even coworkers of joy. To that end, let’s return to the question of definition.

Joy and Her Opposite(s)

One way to define a thing is, of course, to say what it is not, to define it by giving its opposite. The title and theme of this presentation might suggest that joy’s opposite is suffering. I will say a little bit more about suffering in my conclusion, but, for now, let us simply note that if we know anything at all about joy from a biblical perspective we know that its opposite is not suffering. If that were the case, Scriptures’ reports that people rejoiced in their sufferings and Scriptures’ commands that we rejoice in our sufferings would be reduced to nonsense.

I suggest that we first take a step back and look at the word used among ancient Greek speakers outside the biblical world from which our word *joy* ultimately developed. That word was γάμος, εὐδαιμονία, τό, with the related verbs γαίω, γάνυμαι and γηθέω. The number of usage citations for these words given in the lexicon suggests that they were probably not extremely common. What caught my eye about this family of words, however, was a definition of the adjective that was provided by Hesychius () of Alexandria (fifth or sixth century AD). He defined *joyful* by using three other adjectives: λευκόν, , and . According to Hesychius, joyful is defined by these three characteristics: “light or bright, pleasant or sweet, cheerful or merry or gracious.”⁹ Joy’s opposite is not suffering, but it is found in what is gloomy and dark, bitter, cheerless, sorrowful, and ungracious.

Now, my office dictionary defines *dog* as “a domesticated, carnivorous mammal of many varieties.”¹⁰ It’s no easy task to take that definition out on the street with you and use it to identify a real, live dog. In the same way, dictionary definitions alone can hardly be enough for us to know real, live joy when we meet it on the street. For that reason, I enlisted the aid of a dialogue partner, and a most unlikely one at that.

Joy in the World

I came across *The Importance of Living* by Lin Yutang several months ago when I was looking for something else in the library. I decided to take it home and read again

his essay on Christian, Greek, and Chinese views of mankind. Having finished that, I was planning to return the book when I noticed his essay entitled “The Problem of Happiness.” Since the assignment of this paper had turned happiness into a problem for me, I thought it might be worth taking a look, and it was. (I still hope, by the way, to get to his essay “The Importance of Loafing,” but I should probably let the next presenter read that first.)

Lin Yutang was born in Fujian (福建) province in mainland China in 1895. What makes him such an interesting and valuable conversation partner is the rich diversity of “places and promises” in which he lived out his life. Born the son of a Christian pastor, Lin Yutang later wandered away from his faith, turning to Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism for help in determining what it meant to be a young, Chinese man in the early 1900s. Later in life, he would return to the way in which his Christian parents had brought him up. He studied in Shanghai and at Harvard and in Germany. He worked in France and taught in Beijing. He finally settled in the United States, but he was buried in Taiwan. He introduced humor into contemporary Chinese literature. He invented a Chinese typewriter. He produced an outstanding Chinese dictionary. All in all, he seemed an ideal person to consult on the question of the meaning and nature of joy. At the time he wrote this essay, he did not regard himself as a Christian, but I think you will find his thoughts very provocative in light of some of the things we’ve heard from previous presenters. Lin writes:

It is strange that this problem of happiness, which is the great question occupying the minds of all pagan philosophers, has been entirely neglected by Christian thinkers. The great question that bothers theological minds is not human happiness, but human “salvation”—a tragic word. The word has a bad flavor for me, because in China I hear everyday someone talking about our “national salvation.” Everybody is trying to “save” China. [Lin is writing these words in the late 1930s.] It suggests the feeling of a people on a sinking ship, a feeling of ultimate doom and the best method of getting away alive. Christianity, which has been described as “the last sigh of two dying worlds” (Greek and Roman), still retains something of that characteristic today in its preoccupation with the question of salvation. The question of living is forgotten in the question of getting away alive from this world. . . . Theological minds are so much occupied with salvation, and so little with happiness, that all they can tell us about the future is that there will be a vague heaven, and when questioned about what we are going to do there and how we are going to be happy in heaven, they have only ideas of the vaguest sort, such as singing hymns and wearing white robes.¹¹

What, then, is happiness for Lin? He begins by saying that “all human happiness is sensuous happiness”; and he means that quite literally, for he explains: “Happiness for me is largely a matter of digestion.”¹² He is not trying to make light of the subject, rather he is trying to point out that he has never been able to understand or make a distinction between “spiritual” and “physical” happiness or pleasure.

Just as it is impossible for me to say whether I love my children physically or spiritually when I hear their chattering voices or when I see their plump legs, so I am totally unable to distinguish between the joys of the mind and the joys of the flesh. Does anybody ever love a woman spiritually without loving her physically? And is it so easy a matter for a man to analyze and separate the charms of the woman he loves—things like laughter, smiles, a way of tossing one's head, a certain attitude toward things?¹³

Lin makes no apologies for this approach to life and joy, an approach he calls “materialism”: “I am such a materialist that at any time I would prefer pork to poetry, and would waive a piece of philosophy for a piece of filet, brown and crisp and garnished with a good sauce.”¹⁴ Lin argues that what we think of as mental or spiritual pleasures are either at the same time and in their essence sensuous pleasures or they are dangerous things that can easily deprive us of the “feeling of life” and leave us with a world where we have “knowledge without understanding, criticism without appreciation, beauty without love, truth without passion, righteousness without mercy, and courtesy without a warm heart.”¹⁵

One of the most fascinating parts of Lin's description of this “feast of life” is the inclusion of a list of thirty-three happy moments from the seventeenth-century writer Jin Shengtan (金聖嘆). We don't have time here to read through the whole list, but listen to a few of these “happy moments,” mentally comparing them with your own list (which I hope you haven't forgotten).

To cut with a sharp knife a bright green watermelon on a big scarlet plate of a summer afternoon. Ah, is this not happiness?

To open a window and let a wasp out of the room. Ah, is this not happiness?

A traveler returns home after a long journey, and he sees the old city gate and hears the women and children on both banks of the river talking his own dialect. Ah, is this not happiness?

To find accidentally a handwritten letter of some old friend in a trunk. Ah, is this not happiness?

It is a hot day in June when the sun hangs still in the sky and there is not a whiff of wind or air, nor a trace of clouds; the front and back yards are hot like an oven and not a single bird dares to fly about. Perspiration flows down my whole body in little rivulets. There is the noon-day meal before me, but I cannot take it for the sheer heat. I ask for a mat to spread on the ground and lie down, but the mat is wet with moisture and flies swarm about to rest on my nose and refuse to be driven away. Just at this moment when I am completely helpless, suddenly there is a rumbling of thunder and big sheets of black clouds overcast the sky and come majestically on like a great army advancing to battle. Rain water begins to pour down from the eaves like a cataract. The perspiration stops. The clamminess of the ground is gone. All flies disappear to hide themselves and I can eat my rice. Ah, is this not happiness?

To hear our children recite the classics so fluently, like the sound of pouring water from a vase. Ah, is this not happiness?

And one more:

I have nothing to do after a meal and try to go through the things in some old trunks. I see there are dozens or hundreds of I.O.U.'s from people who owe my family money. Some of them are dead and some still living, but in any case there is no hope of their returning the money. Behind people's backs I put them together in a pile and make a bonfire of them, and I look up to the sky and see the last trace of smoke disappear. Ah, is this not happiness?¹⁶

Is this not happiness? How did Jin's list compare with yours? Would you have found joy in these moments?

Joy in the Kingdom

When I composed my own list of my life's moments of joy, I was struck by how few of those moments were experiences that I thought of "theologically." When I then asked myself about the most important moments in my life that I do frame in theological terms, I realized that the feelings I associated with them were things like awe, humility, guilt/shame/contrition, faith and trust, enlightenment and understanding, and peace. My experiences of joy were remarkably similar to Lin's description and had much more to do with "eating the fat and drinking the sweet," with meeting my wife for the first time, seeing her smile, hearing her laugh, watching her walk across the quad in front of Mundinger Hall; with late nights spent with good friends; with babies and grandbabies; with finding the perfect word or the perfect font; with hearing the perfect end to a story or hearing for the first time that melody that haunts you for the rest of your life. These joys did not distance me from my fellow human beings; rather, they brought us together in ways that could have easily united perfect strangers in a moment of common joy.

This realization, however, was not an entirely joyous one. Was Lin right? *Completely* right? Was I—and/or us and/or my faith—mistaken? I laid my list of Bible verses alongside Jin's list of happy moments. What was I missing? A new and fuller realization began to dawn. Ah, is this not happiness?

The realization is hardly a new one; at least I can claim no originality in coming to it. It was there before me all the while:

For you, O Lord, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy. (Ps 92:4)

Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Happy is the man who takes refuge in him! (Ps 34:8)

What struck me as the common feature among all of these moments of happiness, what transcended any division into spiritual or physical, what broke down a false dichotomy between life and salvation, what brought all of the pieces together for me

in joyful harmony was that all of these moments were experiences of the goodness of God. I could find no joy in my list, in my biblical list, in my friend Lin's list, that was not the result of the experience of God's goodness: it was there in the taste of a perfect wine, in the wag of a dog's tail, in the beauty of a person's eyes, in the music of a person's laugh, in justice, in forgiveness, and yes, even in suffering. It all and always springs from the goodness of God.

Faithful Witnesses

As we head into "Part II" which is really my conclusion, we must first talk about the other idea built into the theme of this presentation—not "suffering"—but "witness."

Witnessing According to the Acts of the Apostles

When we hear the term "witness" in a biblical or church or theological context, we almost invariably think immediately of speaking. "Witnessing" means telling others about Jesus, we think. But common sense tells us that witnessing cannot begin with speaking. A witness can only speak after he has seen or heard something. And that is a pattern we see brought out quite clearly in the book of Acts. If we want to be able to draw some conclusions about being "faithful witnesses" in any situation, it will be of great help to us to pause for a moment and trace the outlines of that pattern.

The pattern becomes especially clear once the news of Jesus travels beyond the city limits of Jerusalem, and Luke's two great figures are his two best examples of what it means to be a witness. How does Peter, for instance, come to be at the house of Cornelius (cf. Acts 10)? Has he thought about the implications of the gospel for the salvation of the Gentiles, and then, in light of those implications, has he developed a careful strategy for mission? Peter has to almost be forced against his will to go to Cornelius. Three times God speaks to Peter in a vision, and three times Peter refuses to obey God's command, even lecturing God on the distinction between clean and common. (Peter, plainly, does not prefer pork to poetry!) And Peter's message, when he does finally go, begins with the words, "Now *I* understand." The first lesson was not for Cornelius but for Peter. The Lord leads Peter to the house of Cornelius so that Peter can hear and see *what the Lord* is doing there. Then, and only then, Peter can speak.

Paul, of course, is even more clearly an example of someone who has to have his eyes and ears opened before he can be a witness. Though Paul's Bible teacher was not as good as Peter's teacher, Gamaliel was regarded as one of the greatest teachers of his time. Paul had learned a lot of things, but he didn't know the one thing that he needed to know. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus is filled with irony. Paul had *sent himself* to apprehend the followers of the Way. Along his way, he was himself *apprehended* by the Jesus he was persecuting, and then *sent by Jesus*, that is, made a true *apostle*, to proclaim the message of Jesus. Paul's excellent training in the Scriptures had not opened his eyes to their true meaning. He was certainly among those whom Jesus had said could not find life in the Scriptures because they could not find Jesus in the Scriptures. He had to be shown how blind he was before he could be made to see. In a way just as wonderful and mysterious as the way God had prepared Moses to lead his people, God used Saul's

entire life to prepare him for this revelation of his Son. How brilliantly clear God’s marvelous plan of salvation must have suddenly appeared to Paul in all of its blinding glory! Paul experienced personally the truth of what had been spoken by the prophet Isaiah: “How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?” (Rom 10:14).

The rest of the book of Acts does not tell the story of Paul the great missionary; it tells the story of the Lord Jesus using one of Israel’s most rebellious sons to take the good news into all the world. Anyone who reads Acts carefully knows that Paul is certainly not in control. The Lord, through his Spirit, is guiding Paul every step of the way. Like Peter and like Paul, the reader is not able to know the times and the seasons that the Father has determined. But like Peter and Paul, the reader is invited to journey with the word as it travels out from Jerusalem and to behold the marvelous ways in which God will establish his kingdom of grace. If Peter and Paul were haunted by their pasts, they never mention it. They acknowledge their previous failures, but they go forward in the confidence and joy that Jesus’s gracious answer gives to them: “You will be my witnesses.”

“Singing Better Songs”

So, how can a bunch of melancholy myopics become faithful witnesses in suffering and in joy? How can we look more redeemed and sing better songs? How can we gain a hearing and have something to say worth hearing as we, together with the world, move through seasons of suffering and joy?

In suffering. Shortly after the presentation themes for this symposium were announced, I received an email from a pastor in Illinois. I hope he is here. He asked several very significant questions about the way we regard and live through suffering. I have not spent much time on the topic of suffering for two reasons: one old and one new.

As we began working together to plan these presentations, Chuck Arand made the same observation to me that he made to all of us yesterday. In our Lutheran circles, in pastoral training at the seminary and beyond, in our devotional literature and theological conversations, we seem to devote more time to finding joy in suffering than we do to finding joy in joy. That’s neither as funny nor as puzzling as it first sounds. That this is not some sort of morbid Lutheran imbalance is shown by the following statement from George MacDonald—a statement with which I fully agree. Commenting on Matthew 5:4, “Blessed are those who mourn,” MacDonald writes:

A man in sorrow is in general far nearer God than a man in joy. Gladness may make a man forget his thanksgiving; misery drives him to his prayers. For we are not yet, we are only becoming. The endless day will at length dawn whose every throbbing moment will heave our hearts Godward; we shall scarce need to lift them up: now, there are two doorkeepers to the house of prayer, and Sorrow is more on the alert to open than her grandson Joy.¹⁷

When suffering, too, can be experienced as the goodness of God at work, we will rejoice in suffering and sing praise, however feebly, to the God who saves.

The second and “new” reason is that two of yesterday’s sectionals were devoted to this topic. I was not able to attend the sectional by Dr. Eyer but heard very good

reports concerning it, and my colleague Tim Saleska has already masterfully covered this material with special reference to the Psalms. If you were unable to hear these presentations yesterday, rejoice!, you still have another chance after lunch today.

In connection with that, there is one point that Tim made for us yesterday that I would like to repeat here, even expanding on it a little. In his section “Words Fail,” Tim shared a quote from Richard Rorty. That quote, with perhaps an extra sentence or two reads:

These distinctions help explain why ironist philosophy has not done, and will not do, much for freedom and equality. But they also explain why “literature” (in the older and narrower sense), as well as ethnography and journalism, is doing a lot. As I said earlier, pain is nonlinguistic: It is what we human beings have that ties us to the nonlanguage-using beasts. So victims of cruelty, people who are suffering, do not have much in the way of a language. That is why there is no such things as the “voice of the oppressed” or the “language of the victims.” The language the victims once used is not working anymore, and they are suffering too much to put new words together. So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else. The liberal novelist, poet, or journalist is good at that. The liberal theorist usually is not.¹⁸

We don’t need to be concerned here with Rorty’s understanding of ironist philosophy or to share his concern for liberalism to see the relevant point. Suffering people have no voice because words now fail them. “So the job of putting their situation into language is going to have to be done for them by somebody else.” And theorists, Rorty argues, are not very good at it. The suffering don’t need a theory, they need a story, a story that will draw them in and give them their words back and, ultimately, bring healing and peace. You are not theorists. You know the story that can restore sight and hearing and speech, the story that can bring birth to the dying, and healing, and peace, and salvation.

In joy. I will close with three final points, all aimed at assisting us in the task of being faithful witnesses in joy.

First, we must begin with a reconsideration of the joys we see God’s unbelieving children experience. And yes, they are his children even if they do not know it or know him. Are the world’s joys *all* wicked, deceitful, and vain? It is true that the root that gives us that Greek word γαίω and our English word *joy* appears in Latin as gaudium. Gaudium is not only on the family tree of our word *joy*, it is also the root from which our English word *gaudy* derives. The line between true joy and gaudiness may be a fine one. But if the world cannot experience God’s goodness, how can they receive God’s good *news*? Perhaps the joys we see our unbelieving neighbor, unbelieving brother or sister or parent or child, experience can bring us together in celebration and thanksgiving rather than divide us further. Certainly their understanding of the source of the joy, of the Great Goodness behind it, will be partial or even lacking, but can we not at least allow that it is joy?

Second, and building on that, joy can, but need not always, lead us away from God. Perhaps Scriptures’ repeated admonitions and imperatives for us to rejoice are to be

a reminder to allow God's goodness to bring us even more completely into his embrace and to turn to him with thanksgiving. And here, without going into the details, let me simply note how striking the New Testament vocabulary for joy really is. I mentioned that the *γαῖω* family of words does not occur in the New Testament, but I didn't tell you about the joyful family that is used in its place. The *χαίρω* family of words has to do with the idea of joy in the sense of delight, especially taking delight in something. Cousin to the family is the word for grace, suggesting that one helpful way of describing God's grace is his taking delight in us.¹⁹ Moreover, the word that is sometimes translated as *happy* and sometimes as *blessed*, stands in contrast to the modern English *happy* and the modern Greek equivalent,²⁰ both of which suggest the idea of luck or happenstance. The joy we experience in the goodness of God does not end when our luck runs out or when our circumstance changes for the worse. It is grounded in the blessing of God, his steadfast love, his taking delight in us through his Son, our Lord. And that is what the world does not know and needs to know so that their joy may be complete.

I was a little surprised, in fact, that Lin Yutang did not mention the other side of the traditional Chinese view of joy. With the rest of the world, the Chinese have also expressed their fear that joy today may mean sorrow tomorrow. The saying 樂極生悲 (great joy begets sorrow) dates back to the time before Christ in Chinese culture, and reflects the fears of all who look to luck or fate or self-determination or self-righteousness for their joy and happiness. Better to have a little joy than none at all, such reason warns. How far this is from the fullness of joy promised to us in Christ Jesus!

What our family, friends, and neighbors need is not someone who will cheapen or deprive them of their experiences of the goodness of our God. They need someone whose eyes have been trained to see the way God shows his hand, someone whose ears are attuned to his joyful humming. They need someone who can see and hear and then help them experience even more fully the joy that comes when the goodness of God strokes their faces or dries their tears, awakens their hearts to something they haven't felt in a long time: thankfulness.

Finally, perhaps in our witnessing it is time for us to also ask a few questions. Conversations about joy and suffering can very quickly be taken hostage by the question of "why bad things happen." As Chesterton once pointed out, the question people should be asking is, "Why should *anything* go right?"²¹ Why should fruit taste sweet? Why should a baby's antics make you smile? Why should people find joy in love? Why should we be able to reason or communicate at all? Though many may confess their unbelief in the God we know and love, few can live their day-to-day lives without taking for granted that beneath and behind it all there is something at work to make sure that some things go right.

I will leave you one final thought. I did not include it in my enumeration because it only indirectly helps us be more faithful witnesses and also because it's not mine. Any careful exploration of joy and suffering in the lives of humans in general and Christians in particular will sooner or later lead the explorer into areas of mystery that surpass our understanding. A good and faithful witness also knows when to keep silent.

Also from Chesterton's *Orthodoxy*:

Joy, which was the small publicity of the pagan, is the gigantic secret of the Christian. And as I close this chaotic volume I open again the strange small book from which all Christianity came; and I am again haunted by a kind of confirmation. The tremendous figure which fills the Gospels towers in this respect, as in every other, above all the thinkers who ever thought themselves tall. His pathos was natural, almost casual. The Stoics, ancient and modern, were proud of concealing their tears. He never concealed His tears; He showed them plainly on His open face at any daily sight, such as the far sight of His native city. Yet He concealed something. Solemn supermen and imperial diplomatists are proud of restraining their anger. He never restrained His anger. He flung furniture down the front steps of the Temple, and asked men how they expected to escape the damnation of Hell. Yet He restrained something, I say it with reverence; there was in that shattering personality a thread that must be called shyness. There was something that He hid from all men when He went up a mountain to pray. There was something that He covered constantly by abrupt silence or impetuous isolation. There was some one thing that was too great for God to show us when He walked upon our earth; and I have sometimes fancied that it was His mirth.²²

Endnotes

- ¹ Matthew C. Harrison, *A Little Book on Joy* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 2.
- ² Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Thus Spake Zarathustra," *The Philosophy of Nietzsche* trans. Thomas Common The Modern Library (New York: Random House, 1954), 98.
- ³ Lin Yutang, *The Importance of Living* (New York: John Day Company, 1937), 17.
- ⁴ Martin H. Franzmann, *Pray for Joy* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1970).
- ⁵ Ibid., "To Find Joy in Life's Trials," 12–13.
- ⁶ Ibid., "In an Art Gallery," 35–36.
- ⁷ Ibid., "A Wedding Prayer," 76–77.
- ⁸ Ibid., 9.
- ⁹ Cf. Robert Beekes, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), "γάγνυμαι," 1.260–261.
- ¹⁰ *The Reader's Digest Great Encyclopedic Dictionary*, 1975 edition, "dog," 392.
- ¹¹ Lin, 124–125.
- ¹² Lin, 126.
- ¹³ Lin, 127.
- ¹⁴ Lin, 143.
- ¹⁵ Lin, 142.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Lin, 130–136. I have not quoted them in their original order.
- ¹⁷ MacDonald, "Sorrow the Pledge of Joy," *The Hope of the Gospel* (London: Ward, Lock, Bowden and Company, 1892), 98.
- ¹⁸ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 94.
- ¹⁹ Cf. Beekes, "γαίρω," II.1606–1607.
- ²⁰ (used only of persons).
- ²¹ G. K. Chesterton, "Orthodoxy," *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*; vol. 1 ed. David Dooley; San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 236.
- ²² Ibid., 365–366.