

# Joy:

## Why God Is to Be Treasured



Kids with no shoes smile more than kids with shoes.

I know that sounds definitive, as if I know for certain that it's true. I actually haven't conducted a formal study on the topic, so I guess stating my conclusion so directly could be misleading. But I suspect it's true, and I'll explain why in a moment.

But before we get to that, consider how ridiculous my statement seems at first glance. Shoes are great; they are comfortable and fashionable and effective at protecting our feet. Personally, I haven't ever gone without shoes for an extended period of time, and I consider myself a pretty happy person. So why would a kid with no shoes be happier than me?

Presumably, a number of humans walked the face of the earth before shoes were invented. After all, the traditional interpretation of God's response to Adam and Eve's sin was that He fashioned garments from animal skins and clothed their bodies; it says nothing of Him making slippers out of little bunnies. And today, I find myself, a remote descendant of Adam and Eve, wearing shoes. So someone along the line between them and me must have been the first person to wear shoes.

Whoever this pioneer was, he or she must have felt as if this was the world's greatest invention. Imagine yourself spending the better part of your youth walking across hardened soil and rocky paths and hot sand and cold clay, all in bare feet. You would not think much of it because you would have always walked around in bare feet, just like everyone else. In fact, you would not think of feet as being bare at all; you would simply think of them as feet.

But as you slipped into that first pair of fuzzy slippers or cushioned cross-trainers, or even a shard of animal skin with a vine for straps, imagine the smile that would slowly spread across your face.

You would take your new shoes and walk through the mud and find your feet still clean and dry. Or you might venture out through the desert under the height of the sun's gaze without jumping from one foot to the other. Perhaps you would shove a friend and then run into a field with thorny underbrush just to see if he would chase you.

Eventually, you would stop relishing the fact that you were the only person on the planet with a pair of shoes, and you would help your friends or your mother or your cousins make their own pairs of shoes. And as you watched them test out their new feet on the rocky path, you would see smiles spread across their faces. This would make you smile even more.

Soon enough, your entire village would be walking around in shoes, and everyone would be smiling. Fewer people would have cuts on their feet, and more work could be done to make the village a better place in which to live. The world would open up to you just a bit more, and perhaps you would take a long trip to a village you had never visited before. You and your happy friends would embark, striding confidently and comfortably along your path regardless of what lay beneath your feet.

Eventually, you would come to a village, and you would walk to the center of all the huts, and you would notice that the people, although friendly and

welcoming, were not smiling as much as you and your friends were. This would make all the sense in the world to you because they did not have shoes. While you were there, you might show them how to make shoes, and you would see them smile, and this would cause you to smile even more. And the fact that you were continuing to smile more and more would make you smile still more; the joy in smiling would perpetuate itself.

Near the end of your life, as you looked back on all you had accomplished, you might even consider the experience of inventing shoes to be your greatest achievement. You would think of the hundreds or thousands of people who had improved the quality of their lives because of your discovery. And as you breathed your last few breaths, an enormous grin would spread across your face, revealing the happiness that came to your life through shoes.

So when I say that kids with no shoes smile more than kids with shoes, it's clear that history, at least my version of history, would tell us otherwise. But I still think it may be true.

I'll tell you why. When my friends and I were in Burkina Faso, we traveled each day from the capital city, Ouagadougou, to a rural village called Saonre where the orphan center was located. When we arrived at the center on the first day, we found scores of little children, some of whom had torn clothing and most of whom were without shoes.

As we slowly climbed out of our vans, these children gathered around us in a semicircle, staring at us quietly, lips drawn tightly into stoic poses. We looked back at them, not knowing exactly what to do or say. A moment of awkwardness hung in the air. But then someone in our group waved to them and smiled. And a hundred little teeth shone back brightly in the morning sun.

I have never seen kids smile so big. Or so much.

Joy oozed out of these kids; everything in them delighted to look at us, to smile at us, to touch us, and to laugh uncontrollably at us as we tried to speak their language. They carried our bags, smiling the entire way. They held our hands and walked around the grounds, grinning from ear to ear. All we had to do was look directly at them, and they would break out with joy.

Throughout the workday, as we were slaving over shovels beneath the hot African sun, we would look over at eight-year-old boys or ten-year-old girls pushing wheelbarrows full of dirt. And they were smiling.

Mind you, they didn't have any shoes. They also didn't have parents. Or a change of clothing, or a bed to sleep in, or much food. But they were still smiling.

One of the boys I connected with on the trip is named Mardoche. One morning, as I was mixing cement for the local builders, Mardoche came up to me and made a sign to follow him. So I laid my shovel on the ground and followed him across the grounds. He stopped at the edge of one of the buildings and looked around the corner, and then he beckoned me to come along quietly.

He was being very secretive, so naturally I thought we were going to do something that wasn't allowed, which is always a good time. But as we came to the back of the building, Mardoche looked over his shoulder once more and then put his two hands up to me. In each grubby hand was a piece of bread, one of the two food items he was given to eat each day. He took a bite out of one of the pieces of bread and handed me the other. As I slowly took it from his hand, he looked up at me and said, "Fo ya mum soa," which means, "You are my friend."

I took a bite, looking down at this little boy with no money, no iPod, no Xbox, no suit, no Legos, no soccer balls, no college savings account, no

change of clothes, no parents, and no shoes. Just a ragged T-shirt, a pair of shorts, two little loaves, and the biggest grin this side of heaven.

Mardoche is how I know that kids without shoes smile more than kids with shoes. When I got home from CST, I never considered giving half my food to someone else. I might have given them a bite, but not a big bite, and I probably would have secretly resented them a little. Even if I were overcome with charity and did give half of my food to someone else, I definitely would not smile uncontrollably.

I am still a fan of shoes though. I don't think giving up shoes is necessarily the path to knowing the joy of the Lord. But something about Mardoche's kind of joy is different from my own; he seems to have more of it. All of the kids were like him—so joyful, so giving, yet with hardly anything to call their own.

Jesus talked a lot about joy. So did Paul. And Peter and John and David and Isaiah and Habakkuk and Solomon and James and Jeremiah and whoever wrote 1 Kings. Which ultimately means that God talked a lot about joy. He seems completely intent on us having this joy. We might even say He created us for joy. Or joy for us. Or maybe both.

The Bible speaks about joy in a variety of ways, some of which we might expect and others that don't seem to make sense. We can find joy in good news. We can also find joy as a result of great suffering. We can even find joy by hearing good news *while* suffering.<sup>1</sup>

We also find other spiritual realities or emotions that open the door to this kind of joy. Our salvation produces great joy because we know what we have been saved from and where God means to bring us. Peter says the joy that comes in salvation is "inexpressible and filled with glory." Even sorrow and mourning ultimately lead to unfailing joy.<sup>2</sup>

John wrote his Gospel and the truth about fellowship with God and Jesus

so that our joy may be complete. Paul said his joy would be made complete when believers are of the same mind with one another. James even tells us to “count it joy” when we face trials and suffering.<sup>3</sup>

But God has not limited this joy to just humanity. Even the earth is supposed to get in on all this action. When Solomon was anointed king over Israel, “all the people went up after him...rejoicing with great joy, so that the earth was split by their noise.” David tells all of creation to “shout for joy to God.” The heavens sparkle with good cheer, the seas roar with delight, the fields roll with laughter, and the trees of the forest break forth in song, swinging to the melody of their praises and clapping their hands before their Maker.<sup>4</sup>

We can find joy in good and bad times. It can help us not only endure life but even make life worth living. We are to count our trials as joy, seek joy, make joy complete, and make joy full. Joy exists to make our priorities clear to us. It speaks to us loudly when we taste and see how satisfying it is and softly when we ignore its superior quality. When we experience God’s kind of joy, we know we want it above all else, but we’re not sure how to go about getting it.

I hope this has convinced you God thinks a lot about joy. But I think we should also wonder why He does so.

*Joy* seems to be a more spiritual term than *happiness*, but *happiness* is a good proxy for *joy* and makes it a little easier to understand. When I say everyone wants to be happy, you know what I mean. You want to be happy. I want to be happy. Even grumpy people who give us the finger on the highway or yell at the toaster want to be happy, although they don’t show it very well.

I pursue happiness all the time. In fact, it might be my most important priority. I make nearly all my decisions with my own personal happiness

in mind. When I get up in the morning to have breakfast, I think about whether the chocolate chip oatmeal cookies would make me happier than the grapes and the cereal that tastes like bark. When a friend e-mails a bunch of us to ask for help moving on Saturday, I consider whether that (and the pizza he offers for lunch) would make me happier than surfing all morning and then eating four waffles.

Everyone I know appears to pursue happiness all the time as well. My wife finds a ridiculous amount of happiness in colorful shoes. My parents found a great deal of happiness living in Kauai for nine years, though I can't possibly imagine how they did so. Some of my friends seem to find happiness driving a specific kind of car. Others find it watching football. Some guys I know from work would swear they find happiness by hitting the bars and looking for girls.

All this makes sense to me, that we all pursue our own happiness and chase after joy, because we're self-interested people and because we're products of our environment. And our culture tells us that happiness is *the* goal to be sought after and bought. Aren't commercials claiming to sell us happiness when they show us a pretty girl smiling at a guy who has just popped a new kind of gum? And when men buy that new kind of gum instead of the one in the plain wrapper, do they not somehow think they are buying a small piece of that happiness? We don't buy it for the sake of the pretty girl; we buy it for our own sake, so the pretty girl will like us and perhaps come close to us.

As selfish as we are today, this isn't a modern phenomenon. Our founding fathers considered happiness an "unalienable right" for all free men and women. They were willing to start a revolution, go to war, lose their own lives or the lives of their families, live in exile from their native land, and labor beneath the burden of leading a new nation, all to preserve their right to live freely and happily. And to top it all off, the United States

Supreme Court has also weighed in on the issue of happiness. In an 1884 case called *Butchers' Union Co. v. Crescent City Co.*, Justice Samuel Miller wrote this:

Among those unalienable rights, as proclaimed in [the Declaration of Independence], is the right of men to pursue their happiness...so as to give to them their highest enjoyment.

I'm sure Justice Miller was a very smart and nice man, but my question for him would be this: If our highest enjoyment comes from gaining wealth or knowledge, why was Mardoche so happy when he gave me half his food?

After all, giving me half of his food cost Mardoche something—half of his food, to be precise. I have to assume he would have enjoyed eating his own food, because he doesn't get much of it in the first place. Yet he made a very clear choice that came from his own desire for happiness, and that choice was to give me what he himself could have enjoyed. He evidently weighed his options—either he could eat his food and be happy, or he could give some of it to me and be even happier—and he chose his own greatest joy.

If you're like me, you might think choosing our greatest joy is selfish in the same way that pursuing our own happiness each day can seem selfish. But Mardoche demonstrated otherwise, and John Piper has helped me to see that God means for us to maximize our joy by choosing that which will bring us our greatest pleasure: Him.<sup>5</sup>

Our craving for happiness and joy is from God. He created us with a craving that longs to be filled. And when we fill this hole with anything but Him, we realize none of it works. We find ourselves in a story that has been told for centuries. As the pages turn in our lives, each chapter brings a new pursuit

that eventually ends in disappointment. The plot twists and turns, but the cast of characters remains the same: security, comfort, wealth, power, sex, success, popularity, status... anything and everything we believe will bring us fulfillment. We fail to read between the lines, to see the beauty of the story behind the story. I think we misunderstand the point of the craving itself.

Joy or happiness is what we all crave, but we can satisfy it in only one way. We cannot make joy our ultimate aim because we are not pure enough to seek after it in the right way. We must seek to satisfy our longings, the deepest cravings of our soul, by seeking the One who made us with a desire for Him.

This is the purpose of our cravings. They are signs that lead us to Him.

Before John the Baptist tasted air for the first time, he knew joy came from being close to Jesus.<sup>6</sup> Paul recognized that joy comes as a fruit of being intimately united with the Spirit.<sup>7</sup> David found an excess of joy in the presence of the Father.<sup>8</sup> He also knew that the fullness of joy lay only in the presence of his God.<sup>9</sup>

Many wise men and women have found this joy in being close to Jesus, and they know it is something worth more than the earth's best treasures. Many stories tell us about God's kind of joy and why He is worthy of sacrifice. One old story about such joy bears retelling here.

Once a man was walking along the road outside his town, coming back from a trip to another town on business. This man had his life together: a good wife whom he loved, two small children who were the delight of his eye, a growing and successful local business, and a new home he had built for his family. Life wasn't perfect for this man, but it sure was pretty good.

This man had traveled most of the day, and as he walked, he found himself

daydreaming about his life, contemplating his future for himself and his family. He was beginning to find significance in his life, and he was grateful for all the things he had. The wind picked up slightly, blowing a cloud of dust across his path and bringing him back from his musings. He looked around him, realizing he had wandered just off the main road onto the edge of a field on the outer limits of his town.

As the sun dropped closer toward dusk, the man turned back toward the road, but as he neared the edge of the field, his foot caught something in the dirt. He tripped, catching himself with his hand before he fell. As he regained his footing, he turned to see what had caused him to stumble.

Sticking out of one of the plow lines was a gnarled piece of wood. He pulled away some of the topsoil, revealing a hint of metal. He took a knee and dug some more. Soon, the side of a small box emerged, and as the last rays of light cast about the field, he finally pulled the box from the soil. Night had come, but just enough light remained for the man to put his fingers to the latch. When it opened, he leaned in closely, finding himself staring at hundreds of gold coins. He picked one up, turning it over in his hand while turning over his future in his head. This was no small find; this box contained enough gold to provide for his family for the rest of his life.

The man jumped to his feet and looked around anxiously. His mind raced with questions. Why was this box of gold buried in the ground? Could he keep it? Whom did it all belong to? He thought about taking the box home, but it was far too heavy. He considered taking several coins in his pocket, but he realized that might arouse suspicion from his family or any neighbors who found out. So he decided to put the box back where he found it.

When he finally reached his home, he burst through the door completely out of breath. His wife and children jumped to their feet, first alarmed by

the sudden commotion but then happy to see him. He hugged his family and then pulled his wife aside to tell her what he had found, describing what he had done and seen in every last detail. She had never seen him so excited.

The next day, the man arose from a night of nervous sleep and went to some of the other men in the town, inquiring as to the owner of the large field just outside of town. Before long, he found the owner and went to his home to meet with him. He offered to buy the field, but the owner set a price that was ten times what a field of that size was normally worth.

The man ran home and again told his wife everything that had happened. She said the price was way too high. But the man knew better; he had seen the gold and knew it to be worth hundreds of times the price of the field. All he had to do was come up with the money. He would have to sell all they owned: their house, their livestock, their furniture, their clothes, and their business.

So that is exactly what he did. Leaving everything behind was agonizing, but the man knew what he had to do. Every last thing he and his family owned was sold off to neighbors and friends. Parting with his clothes and furniture and livestock was easy. The business was much harder. He had invested so much of his identity in it, and he had great dreams for its future, but he finally decided it had to go. His home was the hardest to give up. He and his father had built his home themselves, and it held many good and precious memories. His wife cried quietly as he signed over the deed.

Finally, once everything was gone, the man took the money he had received and went back to the owner of the field. He presented himself, weary from all of the work of the past week but happy nonetheless. Laying the outrageous sum on the owner's table, the man said he had come to buy the field. The owner looked at the money and then at the man.

"Why have you done this?" he asked. "Why have you sold all that you have, everything you have worked for your entire life, to buy this field?"

The man replied to him, "I have traded everything in my life for this field because I know that what I have lost cannot compare to what I will gain."

And Jesus said to His disciples, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."<sup>10</sup>

According to Jesus, joy comes when someone finds something worth giving everything up for. Jesus knew this kind of joy firsthand. He gave everything up for His treasure. He shed His heavenly glory for a time, separated Himself from joy-filled fellowship with His Father, took on human flesh, and submitted to the wrath of God, each decision a part of selling all He had because of the treasure he gained in the process: us.

But this parable isn't about Him treasuring us. It's about us treasuring Him.

Because Jesus is most valuable, I want to be facedown in the dirt, hands digging furiously to uncover something more precious than anything the earth can offer. I don't want to stop at accepting the gospel, or view the things of this world as my primary blessings, or even rest in the promise of heaven as the goal of my faith. I want to give up anything and everything that competes with Jesus for the allegiance of my heart. When John Piper asks, "If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauty you ever saw...could you be satisfied...if Christ was not there?"<sup>11</sup> I want to be able to answer with a resounding no.

I suspect the man who bought the field would feel likewise. He didn't want the field for the sake of the field; he wanted it for the treasure that was in

the field. And we shouldn't long for the blessings of this life or even heaven for the sake of heaven. We should ache for the Treasure who will be there. Would that my heart would ache with desire for the Treasure I have found, for this desire to consume all my thoughts and drive away all of my other ambitions so I am left with nothing but this one all-consuming pursuit.

Forgive me for waxing poetic. Actually, that sentiment is quite difficult to live out. My heart isn't consumed with this desire; it's filled with a longing for a new job, some extra sleep, an iPhone, or a comfortable life that doesn't require too much of my time to seek after God. But God has given me a small taste of joy at times, just enough for me to know where I can find it.

I'm thinking of a church service I attended at my parents' church in Knoxville. Pastor John taught powerfully from Scripture that morning, and after he finished, the worship pastor led the congregation in one final song. I remember singing that day, truly worshipping God with my mind, heart, and spirit for one of the few times in my life, and for a brief moment I felt as if I had joined an immense multitude of believers praising God in heaven. A shiver went through my entire body, and I found myself smiling uncontrollably, almost laughing. This small taste of joy was incredibly sweet.

You remember Billy, my friend with malaria. Billy once told me a story about seeking the joy to be found in fellowship with God. He said he was in his bedroom one evening, listening to worship songs through his headphones while working on something. He said the words to one of the songs spoke powerfully to his heart, and he felt incredibly moved by them, feeling the great weight of God's presence in his room. He too described a sensation of joy in the immanence of God's presence. The next day, he came home from work, went straight into his room, put his headphones on, cranked up the same song, and waited for the joy once more.

But nothing happened. God did not show up in the same way. Billy was

left with the normal feeling of sitting on his bed with his headphones on, which was a little awkward.

Billy's story reminded me of my own, and I realized that joy is meant to be sought after, not for the sake of the experience, but for the sake of being with the One who gives us that joy. And it's not something we can replicate anytime we like. When we try to do so, we turn the experience into an idol and worship it instead of God. Our cravings for more of Him and the joy we find in Him are both gifts, but we should always value the Giver far more than the gift.

We don't always feel God's presence, and we aren't always consumed with this kind of joy we've been talking about. But even in those times, we can remember that we will find the greatest kind of joy in Him and that we do what's best for ourselves when we orient our lives around Jesus, knowing that even if we experience some measure of sorrow in this life, the life to come will bring the fullness of joy in His presence.

I am reminded of the joy of my friends in Africa. Mardoche may not be experiencing joy because he is earnestly seeking God with all of his heart. Perhaps he knows joy because he is unencumbered by the things of this world. After all, he doesn't have to choose between trusting God to provide for him and trusting an ATM to have cash that day, because his only provider is God. But he has great joy nonetheless because of his love for God. He values God more than possessions, and this is the perspective that makes him so generous. It's what makes him so happy too.

I want this kind of joy, and I hope you do as well. What will our lives look like when we value God more than anything else in our lives? If we could have all the treasures of the world, great wisdom, and unrivaled power, or if we could just have a new job or a husband or a wife, or if we could even have the kingdom of heaven all to ourselves, would we count all of it as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus? As we



yield our grip on our own personal treasures so we can take hold of the ultimate Treasure, we may find God calling us to literally give everything up to follow Him. Or He may ask us to simply let go of everything within our hearts so He can take full control of our lives.

That's when we'll be able to smile like a kid with no shoes.