

GOD'S GIFT OF JOY

In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy...Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

Philippians 1:4&18-19

What is joy anyhow?

There's a difference between joy and happiness. Joy is something that is unaffected by circumstances. It's not brought on like happiness as in winning a game, getting a big raise, or when we have a great opportunity present itself. Happiness is fleeting and doesn't have much depth. But joy is a state of mind and an attitude of the heart. Joy is deep. It is a settled state of contentment, confidence and hope. Joy brings a sense of peace.

Some people, including myself, have been questioning whether it's possible to focus on Jesus and receive joy while we're in the middle of a deep depression. This is such a good topic for us to talk about, especially since most of have such a hard time feeling close to God when we're in the middle of an episode. But if we question the possibility of joy in the midst of depression, aren't we're actually questioning what God says in the Bible?

Jesus said the following:

"Everything is possible for one who believes."

Mark 9:23

"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Matthew 19:26

My questions at the last meeting, and then again via email were the following:

1. Can you face suffering in the way Paul did when he wrote his letter to the Philippians from prison? Can you keep focusing on Jesus when you're depressed?

Some of you were able to sometimes, but with difficulty.

Some could connect with God with help from the Bible, others can, for brief periods. Another person needs the help of friends.

One person can usually focus on Jesus when she's suffering difficult circumstances, but not when she's suffering poor mental health. This person also said: "My main source of connecting with God remains through the scriptures, but even there, some medications interfere with that. During the many years I was on lithium, I had great difficulty following texts; making my brain follow the lines was almost impossible."

2. Can you recall a time of hardship when focusing on Jesus gave you joy?

One person remembers a sad time when she thought of a promise in Scripture. That gave her relief and happiness.

Another person used a coping mechanism for his OCD which was the equivalent of focusing on Jesus. It brought him comfort and joy.

Someone else finds joy singing songs she sang as a small child.

Another person says that yes, she experiences joy in the middle of depression. But there is a difference between feeling and experiencing joy. She experiences joy when she remembers what Jesus did for her on the cross.

Someone else has been able to feel deep joy by focusing on things and people she's grateful for. For another person joy is never completely gone, in spite of her depression. She tries to keep her heart responsive to God's kindnesses and intervention.

When I asked Pastor Don whether focusing on God and finding joy was possible in the midst of depression, he answered, "As soon as we say something is not possible we're limiting the power of God."

- How do you feel about that? Is God powerful enough?

It's amazing to me how I actually questioned God's ability to make focusing on Him possible in the midst of depression. All these questions have been a good exercise.

Gordon Fee, author of *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* (Eerdmans, 1995), wrote, "Joy does not mean the absence of sorrow but the capacity to rejoice in the midst of it." The way I read that is that we are able to be open to receiving joy, though it may not always come.

- How can we keep the capacity to feel joy in the midst of sorrow alive?

I was moved by what Ana said: "I feel that it is in the hard times when I am battling against myself that He is relentless in pursuing me and letting me know that He knows my fears, my sadness and my suffering. And by realizing and knowing this, it gives me calm and peace and deep, deep gratitude."

- Can you feel God pursuing you? In what way?