

GOD'S GIFT OF JOY

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 us have such a hard time to feel 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 God?

I asked members of my group and the following are their answers:

1. 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.
- 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.
- How do you feel about that? Is God powerful enough?

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?