

Where do you find joy? Most of the time when we read the word joy in the Old Testament it relates to a jubilant expression such as dance, or song, or praise to God over a wonderful turn of events. I am speaking of joy that is an abiding sense that all is well, and come what may, it will be well. Perhaps the closest Hebrew word to what I mean is *shalom*. It is a deep sense of peace knowing all is well regardless of circumstances (Genesis 15:15ⁱ).

Last week in James 4 we looked at the two very different life paths that are before us. One is fondness of the world and what it can offer. The other is intimacy with God. One is seeking satisfaction from temporal things; the other is to commit our lives to seeking God and His will. The one leads to temporary enjoyment followed by disappointment and an ever-increasing desire for more (2 Corinthians 4:17,18ⁱⁱ). The other leads to joy unspeakable and full of glory and to peace with God and man (1 Peter 1:8ⁱⁱⁱ).

It seems like an easy choice, and it would be if it was not for our fallen nature and its desire to be our own god. Satan's first temptation has always been his greatest tug at the free will of man. "You shall be as gods (Genesis 3:5^{iv})! Do what you want. Doubt that God has your best interest at heart in His commands for you." Of course, Satan is often much more subtle than that, but we can summarize all temptations that way. We see it regularly with young people who claim to have Christ consciousness, which to them means that they have realized they are god. As James told us, it is a demonic attempt to make us enemies of God (James 3:15^v). That is the opposite of *shalom*, being at peace with God resulting in calm assurance.

I would like to show you an Old Testament foreshadow of one of our great reasons for joy. It is from the days of Ezra. The Jews had lived in exile for 70 years. The Persian king decided to let people groups previously conquered return to their lands and build their places of worship so they could offer prayers for his success. Ezra led a group of Jews back to Jerusalem and began rebuilding the temple. Once the foundation was laid, which was perhaps the most difficult and important part of rebuilding the temple, the workers found themselves overcome with joy.

¹⁰ And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the directions of David king of Israel. ¹¹ And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD, "For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel." And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. Ezra 3:10,11

The Laws of Moses prescribed that sacrifice could only be done in the temple (Leviticus 17:8,9^{vi}). The reason that the people were so joyful, is they could now see that God had not abandoned them. Soon they would be offering sacrifices according to the Law and they would again have peace that they were right with God. Those sacrifices looked forward in faith to God's provision for our sins (Hebrews 10:1-4^{vii}). This hope for peace with God resulted in them singing the ancient song of Israel. "*For he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.*" It appears that they sang this chorus antiphonally. One group would sing, another would respond or repeat. They saw the

goodness of God in His mercy to forgive them from their past idolatry and to restore them to their land, and even providing for the rebuilding of the temple. It was not that all the conditions were wonderful. They had enemies without and within. Everywhere they turned were piles of rubble (Nehemiah 4:10^{viii}). Their enemies were lying about them to the king. They had already compromised by marrying women who worshiped other Gods and had to repent (Ezra 10:10-12^{ix}). But the foundation was laid and hope for restoration of the temple and city was rising. They could see God's hand at work in their difficult circumstances.

This restoration to their homeland is a picture of redemption. We were born into captivity. The one who sins, Jesus said, is a slave to sin (John 8:34^x). We were captives even to a greater extent than the Israelites were. But God called us home, a home we had never lived in, but which we knew our fathers had spoken of with great longing. And what is this new temple being built? The Scriptures say that we are temple of the living God (2 Corinthians 6:16^{xi}). As living stones, we make up the new temple. And what is the foundation that has been laid? *¹¹ For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.* 1 Corinthians 3:11

Just as the remnant in Jerusalem rejoiced when they saw the temple foundation was finished, so we too can rejoice that the foundation of Jesus' sacrifice for us was accepted by God. We see that in the resurrection. And that is our hope that gives us great joy. The heavenly city, New Jerusalem will be finished one day. *² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away."* Revelation 21:2-4 Unlike Jerusalem of old, new Jerusalem will never be conquered. It will be a place of eternal peace. God's manifest presence will be in our midst. Nothing vile or detestable will ever enter the city, our eternal home (Revelation 21:27^{xii}). It is a place of wonder beyond our present comprehension, and it is prepared for all who love our Lord (John 14:2^{xiii}).

Isaiah looked forward to this day and twice predicted, *¹⁰ And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.* Isaiah 35:10; 51:11 That could not be the return from Persia for they had sorrows that followed. Being in Christ is the fulfillment of what that return was just a shadow. When we count our blessings, our number one on the list should be that Jesus made a way for us to live in eternal *shalom*, which is peace, gladness, and everlasting joy. Our hearts will be so overflowing with gladness that we will not want to stop singing the praises of the Lamb for all that He has done for us. How we should be thankful for the cross that makes this glorious future possible. Not only will there be no sorrow, but we will not even have cause to sigh!

That was a long way to declare my number one reason for thanks, but I wanted you to see how this glorious promise had its shadows in the Old Testament. If their joy at the completion of the shadow was so great, how much more should our joy be that the foundation stone, Jesus, has been placed for the eternal temple!

Their song praised the goodness of God. They saw that goodness in their return to the land, the foundation being laid, in God not forsaking them, and the hope of the future temple. We can see the goodness of God in the cross, in the resurrection that foreshadows our own resurrection, and in Jesus' victory over death and hell (1 Corinthians 15:49^{xiv}). When we grasp what He accomplished on our behalf, our afflictions, and the things that we get upset over are nothing by comparison. It is just that we have become so accustomed to this wonderful grace we have received, that we grow familiar with being so blessed. We get wrapped up in the little details of daily life with all its demands and forget that we are swimming in an ocean of grace and love (2 Timothy 2:4^{xv}). But there is a day coming, brothers and sisters, when the wonder of Jesus' love will continually fill our vision. We need to frequently stop our busyness and often take time to look at it, which is what we do when we take communion or count our blessings. We need to do that regularly so that we do not get so caught up in the things of this life that we forget what has been done for us and the glory awaiting us.

God is good! Everything He does is good! What He allows in the lives of those who love Him will turn out for their good (Romans 8:28^{xvi}). Let us continually be thankful we serve a good God. I am combining **what Jesus has done for us and the goodness of God** as the first on my list. I combine them because I believe that what Jesus has done for us as the greatest expression of God's goodness.

Number two on my list is the second description in Israel's song. *His **steadfast love** endures forever*. The most frequent description of God in the Old Testament is steadfast love. It is the Hebrew word *hesed*. It can be translated as mercy or loving kindness. The Scriptures tell us that He is *abounding in steadfast love* (Numbers 14:18^{xvii}). Where would we be without the mercy and love of God? That steadfast love endures forever (1 Chronicles 16:34^{xviii}). And we can be thankful that it does. Imagine if one day, like some fickle person, God would say He does not love us anymore. Thankfully the Word of God declares that will never happen, for He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Hebrews 13:8^{xix}).

My number three blessing is that **God promises to finish the work He started in us** (Philippians 1:6^{xx}). That means one day we will no longer be tempted. We will no longer try to exert our will over God's good will, nor will anyone we meet in heaven. In fact, every single person will be like Jesus, with all the fruits of the Spirit (1 John 3:2^{xxi}). Imagine that! And no will put on a false front or not be honest or be selfish. It reminds me of traffic jams at past Promise Keeper events. Cars would get backed up leaving the stadiums because everyone would want to let the other person go first. Kindness and love will be all we express and all that is expressed toward us.

Since I am on the topic of heaven and the work in us being finished, I am going to include with number three my gratitude that **every tear will be wiped away**. We all have scars. Some of us more than others. That includes the regrets stemming from our past selfish behavior. God has forgiven that behavior because of what Christ has done, but my past grieves me, because I know Christ bore the judgment for it. Those tears will also be wiped away. Maybe that just means a fuller realization that my sins are removed as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12^{xxii}). It will mean our rejoicing will not be tinged with our past regrets. Won't that be wonderful!

Number four on my list is **the Bible**. God chose to communicate with us through words. He breathed these inspired words through the writers (2 Peter 1:21^{xxiii}). I have no

doubt that they are inspired because of the interwoven messages written over 1500 years by 40 men from all walks of life. The more I study it, the more amazing I find it to be. It renews my mind (Romans 12:2^{xxiv}). It helps me see the beautiful and perfect nature of God. It also helps me understand the fallen condition of man, but most importantly how God provided redemption for our sin sick souls and a path to transformation in this life and completed holiness in our eternal state. The Word helps me distinguish truth from error. It is light in the darkness of this world. It reveals our Savior and His teaching that shows the perspective of heaven. It is the daily manna for our souls.

Number five is **the Holy Spirit**. Where would we be without the Holy Spirit making the Word come alive to us? John said that the Spirit will remind us of what Jesus taught. He is our Comforter and Counselor. He is the One who indwells our Spirit and intercedes for us according to the will of God (Romans 8:27^{xxv}). He convicts us when we go the wrong way, often warning us in advance. He inspires the words we share with hungry hearts. What a blessing it is to have the Holy Spirit residing in us, guiding, convicting, teaching, and interceding for us.

Number six is **prayer**. What a gift prayer is. Addressing Almighty God is possible because of reason number one, what Jesus did for us. He made it possible for us to come before the throne of God with boldness and pour out our hearts to Him. He invites us to ask for help in our times of need (Hebrews 4:16^{xxvi}). We come before His presence with singing and enter His courts with praise (Psalm 100:4^{xxvii}). Prayer is a chance for us to cooperate with God as we pray for His will to be done in the earth (1 John 5:14^{xxviii}).

Prayer is one area of my life I want to be more disciplined to exercise. The times that I share my heart with God and then hear that still, small voice respond with direction and encouragement are the best (1 Kings 19:12^{xxix}). It reminds me of Psalm 46:10. *Be still and know that I am God*. I believe that is one of the main ways God increases our love for Him. He is so personal, so loving, and gracious. I know it is hard to be still in our culture and expect God to speak to our heart, but I would encourage you to develop the habit. Do not give up. Let Him bring Scriptures to your mind. Meditate on those words and see what He is speaking to your heart.

Number seven on my list is all **the wonderful brothers and sisters I have known**, the body of Christ. That includes my wife and my children and their children and so many people I have worshipped with over the years. It also includes you and those who are already home with Jesus, and especially those men who mentored me. How many people have you known in this life who have been gracious and kind to you? How many have encouraged you in the Lord? How many are even now in this fellowship? It is wonderful to go through this life journey with kind and loving people who also know the Lord. They exhibit God's love to us as we should to them.

Number eight on my list of gratitude is **the fact that I was raised in a Christian environment**. Despite all the tragedies and mistakes and misrepresentations of the truth, I have grown up with God's Word. I came to Christ at the age of five. I was always around the Bible. I was blessed to attend a Christian elementary school that had us memorize God's Word. Regular reading of Scripture has been part of my whole life. That is what got me through the tragedies and mistakes I made. I wonder how people in nations that worship other gods or that are secular get through life. And despite the waywardness of our nation, there is still more Christian influence in our culture than in most. That is a blessing that I think we take for granted. We complain about the demoralization of our

society, and it is tragic. But we take for granted the godly influences that still remain in much of our culture.

Number nine on my top ten list **God's calling on my life**. It is completely by grace. I do not deserve to be a preacher of the Word of God. I will never forget the day in a tiny room in a church on Brewer Road while trying to keep the books, that still small voice asked me what I wanted to do. I said I wanted to preach the Word, but I believed that like David the things that I had done disqualified me from that possibility (1 Chronicles 22:7,8^{xxx}). When that same small voice said He was willing to use me, I broke down and cried for quite a while. It still chokes me up. The books and devotions in print and online are something I never imagined. I just wanted to be used for His glory, and He has done far more than I could have imagined. 22 years here at Wayside has been more than I could ask for. I would never have dreamed of guiding groups to Israel, discovering lesser-known sites, feeding the homeless, and mission trips to India and West Africa. Grace upon grace upon grace!

Number ten on my list is **my godly heritage**. Scripture tells us that God blesses the righteous to a thousand generations. I had some characters in my genealogy, but also some very godly people. I had a praying mother. I know that made a huge difference in my life. We sometimes wonder where we would be without their prayers.

This is my top ten items for which I am thankful. I could go on and on with things like a home, nature, living here, diving in the ocean, provision, having traveled so much and on and on. If you did not fill out your list as I went through the message, I encourage you to do so when you get home. Take time. Post it somewhere that you will see it. When the going gets tough, read it through slowly and think about each one. Thank God for each one and how God has blessed your life. It will put your present problems in perspective and remind you what is really important. That will be the case if you have your priority on the eternal things, which is the wisdom that comes from above (James 3:17^{xxxj}).

As you gather to celebrate the season, may you and your family remember the many blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus, in living in this country and in this age (Acts 17:26^{xxxiii}). May our time together be filled with praise to God for all His goodness and His steadfast love. Let me briefly review.

- 1 What Jesus has done for us and the goodness of God.
- 2 His steadfast love endures forever.
- 3 God promises to finish the work He started in us. Every tear wiped away.
- 4 The Bible
- 5 The Holy Spirit
- 6 Prayer
- 7 The wonderful brothers and sisters I have known
- 8 That I was raised in a Christian environment
- 9 God's calling on my life
- 10 My godly heritage

I want to end the time of worship sharing a recently released song. I'm sure you will get the connection. Then I will close with a benediction and prayer for the meal and our time of fellowship.

ⁱ **Genesis 15:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.

ⁱⁱ **2 Corinthians 4:17-18 (ESV)**

¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,

¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

ⁱⁱⁱ **1 Peter 1:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,

^{iv} **Genesis 3:5 (ESV)**

⁵ For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

^v **James 3:15 (ESV)**

¹⁵ This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic.

^{vi} **Leviticus 17:8-9 (ESV)**

⁸ “And you shall say to them, Any one of the house of Israel, or of the strangers who sojourn among them, who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice ⁹ and does not bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting to offer it to the LORD, that man shall be cut off from his people.

^{vii} **Hebrews 10:1-4 (ESV)**

¹ For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near. ² Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, since the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins? ³ But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. ⁴ For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

^{viii} **Nehemiah 4:10 (ESV)**

¹⁰ In Judah it was said, “The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. By ourselves we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”

^{ix} **Ezra 10:10-12 (ESV)**

¹⁰ And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have broken faith and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. ¹¹ Now then make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” ¹² Then all the assembly answered with a loud voice, “It is so; we must do as you have said.

^x **John 8:34 (ESV)**

³⁴ Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.

^{xi} **2 Corinthians 6:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, “I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

^{xii} **Revelation 21:27 (ESV)**

²⁷ But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.

^{xiii} **John 14:2 (ESV)**

² In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

^{xiv} **1 Corinthians 15:49 (ESV)**

⁴⁹ Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

^{xv} **2 Timothy 2:4 (ESV)**

⁴ No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.

^{xvi} **Romans 8:28 (ESV)**

²⁸ And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

^{xvii} **Numbers 14:18 (ESV)**

¹⁸ ‘The LORD is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation.’

^{xviii} **1 Chronicles 16:34 (ESV)**

³⁴ Oh give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; for his steadfast love endures forever!

^{xix} **Hebrews 13:8 (ESV)**

⁸ Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

^{xx} **Philippians 1:6 (ESV)**

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

^{xxi} **1 John 3:2 (ESV)**

² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

^{xxii} **Psalms 103:12 (ESV)**

¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

^{xxiii} **2 Peter 1:21 (ESV)**

²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

^{xxiv} **Romans 12:2 (ESV)**

² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

^{xxv} **Romans 8:27 (ESV)**

²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

^{xxvi} **Hebrews 4:16 (ESV)**

¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

^{xxvii} **Psalms 100:4 (ESV)**

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise! Give thanks to him; bless his name!

^{xxviii} **1 John 5:14 (ESV)**

¹⁴ And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us.

^{xxix} **1 Kings 19:12 (KJV)**

¹² And after the earthquake a fire; *but* the LORD *was* not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

^{xxx} **1 Chronicles 22:7-8 (ESV)**

⁷ David said to Solomon, "My son, I had it in my heart to build a house to the name of the LORD my God.

⁸ But the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'You have shed much blood and have waged great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me on the earth.

^{xxxi} **James 3:17 (ESV)**

¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.

^{xxxii} **Acts 17:26 (ESV)**

²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place,