



Look... Learn... Lead Study Guide

Looking for the Holy Spirit's direction

Learning through God's Word

Leading others in a personal relationship with Christ

Sermon Series

"Simple Joy"

WEEK 1

Sunday, December 2, 2018 — "Simple Joy ... Moving from Darkness into the Light"

Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning. (Psalm 30:5b)

I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow. (Jeremiah 31:13b)

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to tread on the heights. (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

Monday, December 3, 2018 — A God Who Changes Mourning into Joy (Psalm 30:1-5, 11-12)

Psalm 30 reflected a time of severe trouble, one that threatened life itself (verse 3). "The psalmist may have been healed from a life-threatening illness, but the language could be metaphorical."¹ Whatever the specific circumstances, the psalmist's focus was on how God had driven away the threat and restored joy to life. Most individuals, as well as Israel as a nation, could remember times when mourning had turned to joy.

- Scholar Donald Williams wrote, "In [the psalmist's] illness there has been weeping, the sense of God's absence, and mourning. Now... the healing of God has turned sorrow into joy."² Is it possible for difficult times to make God feel absent even for people of faith? (Don't forget Jesus quoting Psalm 22:1 on the cross.) We sometimes use the phrase "God showed up" to describe times of recovery and restoration.

Whether we mean that literally or metaphorically, how does that contribute to joy at those times?

- This psalm fits into larger contexts as well. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said in a sermon titled "A Knock at Midnight," "I read these words: 'The United States Supreme Court today unanimously ruled bus segregation unconstitutional in Montgomery, Alabama'.... The dawn will come.... 'Weeping may endure for a night,' says the Psalmist, 'but joy cometh in the morning.' This faith adjourns the assemblies of hopelessness and brings new light into the dark chambers of pessimism."³ Can you think of times when "dawn" has come in the world's history? What are one or two areas of life in which you look forward to God bringing a joyous morning to our world in the future?

Prayer: Lord, when I face hard times where "weeping may stay all night," I thank you that the worst thing is never the last thing, that in the end you always have and always will turn sorrow into joy. Amen.

Tuesday, December 4, 2018 — Choosing to Rejoice Even in Hard Times (Habakkuk 3:17-19)

The prophet Habakkuk lived just before Babylon's armies invaded Judah, leveled Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon's beautiful Temple. There was much corruption and evil in Judah. When Habakkuk asked God to do something about it, he said God's reply was "I am about to rouse the Chaldeans [Babylonians]" (Habakkuk 1:6). The prophet wrestled with despair. But in today's passage, he resolved that, no matter how bad things got, he would "rejoice in the God of my deliverance."

- At the end of his short book, Habakkuk pictured utter disaster in an agricultural land. No figs, no grapes, no olives, no crops, no sheep or cattle — it's hard to imagine how things could get much worse.

Did "I will rejoice in the Lord" mean the prophet would say, "Oh, boy — it's great that we have no food"? What might "rejoice in the Lord" mean when life is difficult?

- Thích Nhất Hạnh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet and peace activist, said, "Sometimes your joy is the source of your smile, but sometimes your smile can be the source of your joy." How does his statement relate to the kind of determined faith commitment the Hebrew prophet wrote down some 2500 years ago? How can joy be something you choose, not something that just happens?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, even the "first world problems" we sometimes talk about can feel bad and discouraging to me. Teach me how to trust in you as deeply as your puzzled but faithful servant Habakkuk. Amen.

Wednesday, December 5, 2018 — In God's World, Even the Worst Doesn't Last Forever (Jeremiah 31:10-13)

Jeremiah's prophetic commission was a painfully lonely one. Much of the time, he pled with the citizens of Jerusalem not to throw away their lives by fighting the invading Babylonian troops (cf. Jeremiah 21:8-9, for example). But in today's reading, he looked ahead and spoke of hope and joy. The day would come (not right away, but it would come) when Israel's exile would end. And, like the glow of dawn on the horizon, Jeremiah's words hinted at the day when God would turn all "mourning into laughter and sadness into joy."

- Jeremiah 31 began with the words "at that time." Scholar Andrew Dearman wrote, "'That time' is a reference to a decisive time of divine activity and the resulting changes ...

How far into the future is not specified by such references; the emphasis is on the qualitative changes between the present grim circumstances and the future God has promised."⁴ Jeremiah's message said neither Israel's exile, nor the world's brokenness, would last forever. How easy or hard do you find it to trust that God's great story ends in joy, not in sorrow?

- The verse 12 promise that "they will grieve no more" fit well with the words of Isaiah 25:8: "The LORD God will wipe tears from every face." What events or situations have brought the most grief into your life? How meaningful to you is the promise that God will ultimately heal your grief, that you will grieve no more?

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the prophetic promise that your story (and therefore mine as your child) ends in joy. I eagerly look forward to that wonderful day. Amen.

Thursday, December 6, 2018 — “Overjoyed” — Returned from Exile, Looking for Ultimate Redemption (Psalm 126:1-6)

Israel’s long history included incredibly low times of misery at the hands of tyrants (notably slavery in Egypt — cf. Exodus 1:8-11, and exile in Babylon — cf. 2 Kings 24:13-14, 25:11). But it also included God’s action to deliver them in the Exodus and in the return from exile. Psalm 126 poetically recalled the joy they felt when God lifted them up from their lowly status, and prayed trustingly that God would again allow them to live in the joy of divine deliverance.

- The first half of this psalm was a journey in memory. The Israelites never forgot the Exodus from Egypt — their “defining story” — nor their jubilation when God set them free from exile. “Yes, the Lord

Prayer: Lord God, thank you for the times — like Jesus’ first coming — when you did great things for your people. Help me to live in the confidence that, sooner or later, you always act to lift us up and bring us joy. Amen.

Friday, December 7, 2018 — The Day When “All the Trees of the Field will Clap Their Hands” (Isaiah 55:6-13)

Two chapters earlier, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 declared that the person God called “my servant” would conquer evil, not by brute force, but by taking all of evil’s worst upon himself, absorbing and destroying its power to lastingly hurt others. Chapter 55 built on that, telling readers that God’s superbly merciful acts are very different from our usual human patterns. As we choose to respond to God’s mercy, we join in a cosmic celebration full of peace, joy and song.

- How does Isaiah’s description of the gap between God’s mercy and our usual human ways of relating speak to your heart? Sometimes when we read Isaiah’s words, or Jesus’ teaching about loving enemies, we might think, “Sounds nice — but it would never work.”

Prayer: Lord, did your servants 500 years before Christ read these words and think, “Just how will that work?” I know more about the story of Jesus, but it still contains a lot of wonder and mystery. Thank you for the story and the promise of your saving work for me. Amen.

Saturday, December 8, 2018 — “When I Go ... I Will Return” (John 14:1-3, Acts 1:10-11)

In John 13:33, Jesus told the disciples, “I’m with you for a little while longer.” Peter almost immediately asked, “Lord, where are you going?” To what was probably a circle of worried faces, Jesus said, “Don’t be troubled...I will return.” Jesus’ talk of going away puzzled his disciples. But he promised that he would return, and that when he did his followers could always be with him. He gave them a vivid picture of God’s house as a spacious place with plenty of room for everyone.

- At times we tend to ‘sell’ people on heaven by listing benefits — golden streets, no death, mansions. (Actually, “my Father’s house

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for your message that “the best is yet to come.”

Help me to live in trust, hope and joy as I follow you all the way to your Father’s spacious house. Amen.

Family Activity

Mary and Joseph were full of joy at the birth of Jesus. Then the angel joyfully told the shepherds that Jesus had been born and the shepherds joyfully told others! How can you joyfully tell others about the birthday of Jesus? First, create a list of people with whom you want to share the good news of Jesus. Consider neighbors, community workers, store clerks, family and

friends. Next, discuss fun and creative ways you could share the exciting news of Jesus’ birth and His love. You might bake treats, design cards, create a simple craft or write a simple note. Deliver your items to people. Let each person know you are praying for him or her during this Christmas season and throughout the year. Share the joy of Jesus with everyone!

- The second half of the psalm became a prayer that the same God who did great things in the past would do them again. It used harvest language, picturing the ideal conditions for agricultural people. Are there parts of your life in which you want to ask God (perhaps a more urban version of) “Let those who plant with tears reap the harvest with joyful shouts”?

Are you convinced that God’s ways are indeed higher than ours? Do you believe God’s way is the only path to ultimate peace and good, or just hopelessly naïve idealism?

- In verses 12 and 13, “while much more than deliverance from physical captivity is being talked about, that imagery would communicate most immediately in the circumstances of the Exile. All nature will rejoice in the redemption of humanity (cf. 42:10; 44:23; 49:13), and in place of sorrow and sighing there will be ‘joy’ and ‘peace’ (cf. 35:10; 51:11) as the captives return to their God.” How did the prophet’s vision of God’s sweeping redemption and restoration of the human family create a solid foundation for living with joy?

has room to spare” conveys the same message that “many mansions” did in the 1611 English of the King James Version.) What one specific feature of the future life did Jesus mention in verse 3? How appealing do you find the promise of being with Jesus? Have you faced and dealt with your fear of death and what comes next? Jesus came to “set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death” (Hebrews 2:15). In what ways can your model of finding greater freedom from that pervasive human fear help others you care about overcome their fears?

¹ J. Clinton McCann, study note on Psalm 30:2 in The CEB Study Bible. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2013, p. 870 OT.

² Donald Williams, The Preacher’s Commentary Series, Volume 13: Psalms 1–72. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986, p. 239.

³ A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr., edited by James M. Washington. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986, p. 504.

⁴ J. Andrew Dearman, The NIV Application Commentary: Jeremiah, Lamentations. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002, p. 283.