

Joy // The Way Back to Joy

While many of us would say that we want more joy in our life, we may even acknowledge that we were created by God for a JOY filled life, even though we may engage in spiritual practices that are designed to increase our joy, there still seems to be this barrier that is keeping us from the fullness of joy that God has for us.

In order to understand what is holding us back or keeping us from that joy, we have to go back to the beginning. Because the human story begins with an extraordinary God creating an extraordinary world filled to the brim with joy. He created the world to be good. All the creatures in it are good, the whole realm of nature is good, and then He crowns the whole of creation with human beings and calls them, "very good." The world is a paradise, and all of creation is in perfect, unhindered, harmonious relationship with God, and God is pleased to dwell with His good creation. God delights in His creation and the whole of creation delighted in God.

Genesis 3:1-11, Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself." He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

What continues after this is they start pointing fingers at one another. Adam blames Eve, Eve blames the serpent, and the serpent sort of owns it.

But what we see is something unfolding here that is so dangerous, so deadly to the human soul, so profoundly damaging to your heart and mind, so destructive to the health of your relationships, even to your body.

I believe this one thing has the most potential to keep you from the joy that God created you for.

SHAME

Q: In recent years there's been an ENORMOUS amount of research into this topic. At what age do you think human beings first begin to experience shame?

15 months old. Before language, before cognitive understanding, before feeling bad because of how someone treated you, before the prefrontal cortex is developed, you are already sensing things about yourself in the context of your environment, and your caregivers, and you don't even have the ability to understand any of it yet, but it's already there. See, shame tells a story.

"We yearn to tell and hear stories of goodness and beauty, and this is the echo of God's intention. We long for our stories to be about joy, not just reflections of what we believe but of who we are, who we long to be... But shame wants very much to infect every element of the mind in order to distort God's story and offer another narrative."

- Dr. Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*

Curt Thompson and many others have spoken and written extensively on this topic, and in one way or another, they all say something like this:

Shame is about identity. Guilt is about behavior.

The story shame tells us:

- Is not *"I did something wrong,"* but *"something is wrong with me."*
- It's not *"I've made a mistake, and I can learn from it,"* but *"I am a mistake and I'll never learn."*
- Guilt says, *"I did something bad,"* shame says, *"I am bad."*

Genesis 2:25, "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed."

She eats, Adam eats, and the disease of sin is introduced into the world, and now the whole of humanity is born into a world infected with shame. The path away from joy began with shame, and the way back to joy is the hard, deep soul work of our own shame.

What's so fascinating is that what we find in Gen 3 is not only the introduction and the diagnosis of the problem, but the offering of the solution as well. The roadmap back into the joy that God created us for.

In his book, Chuck DeGroat wholeheartedly points to the fact that God asks us three specific questions in Genesis 3, and without brutal, gut-wrenching, terrifying levels of honesty and vulnerability around these 3 questions, we won't experience the full range of joy that God has created us for.

QUESTION 1: "Where are you?"

Genesis 3:9, " But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, 'Where are you?'"

Did God already know where Adam was? Of course. So, is God asking for His benefit? No, he's asking for Adam's benefit. And the invitation of the question is this, *How are you showing up in the world? What's going on with you? What's showing up in your reactions? What's driving those reactions, and behaviors?*

Where are you?

Genesis 3:10, "And he said, 'I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.'"

Notice Adam's response. We typically don't view it as being all that profound, but his level of self-awareness is pretty remarkable... *"I was afraid. Why? because I was naked. What did I do? I hid myself."*

It's pretty astounding. Adam verbalizes to God not just what he did. He names what he felt, why he felt that way, and then what he did about it.

Most of us go through our entire lives making decisions, reacting to things and people and situations for reasons that we don't even understand. We are living in a world that is so distracted, so frenzied, so fast-paced, so beyond our capacity to keep up with... and yet we're trying desperately to do so... we don't have a free moment to pay attention to what we're feeling. The level of emotional intelligence and maturity in the world is so unbelievably crippled, primarily because we never slow down long enough to even hear God's question to us, *"where are you,"* and most of us avoid the question because we're terrified of the answer.

That question is an invitation to slow down and really be curious about your own life. Where am I? How am I showing up in the world? Am I anxious? Fearful? Angry? Am I tense? Why is that? Am I combative, aggressive, defensive? Why is that? What's going on with me?

Psalms 139:23, "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! "

This is an invitation for God to come and meet us where we've been hiding, to reveal in us the things that we'd put in our closets that we don't want anyone else to see. To some degree, this is the story: *"Well, if they knew about that, they would reject me. If they really knew me, they wouldn't love me."*

And because of that story, we do exactly what Adam and Eve did. We hide. We hide from God, and we hide from one another. And notice in their story, one of the most effective ways to hide is by blaming. It's by condemning or shaming someone else.

Look at Adam and Eve:

Genesis 3:11-13, "...Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" The man said, "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate." Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."

See, God puts the spotlight on Adam and Adam says, "*It was her! ...And You! Anybody but me!*" Then the spotlight goes to Eve, and Eve says, "*Well, who else is there? It was the serpent... anybody but me.*"

"It's not my fault. It's them. It's not my fault, it's everyone else. There were extenuating circumstances. It was all these other things..."

Those of us carrying unaddressed shame find it easiest to shame and condemn others. But only when you do that hard work of inviting God into the deepest parts of your shame, only then are you free not to condemn or shame others, because you're no longer hiding from your own.

See the reason why God asks us the question, "where are you?" is because He's deeply committed to freeing us from our shame, to bring us out of hiding. Out of our isolation. Out of the self-condemning, self-sabotaging narratives that are playing out in our hearts and minds.

"Those parts of us that feel most broken and that we keep most hidden are the parts that most desperately need to be known by God, so as to be loved and healed...God came to find Eve and Adam to provide them the opportunity to be known as He knows anything else. For only in those instances when our shamed parts are known do they stand a chance to be redeemed. We can love God, love ourselves or love others only to the degree that we are known by God and known by others."

- Dr. Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*

When we're afraid of being known, we hide. We isolate, we shame, and condemn. And as long as we're stuck in those patterns, it will keep us of the joy God created us for!

QUESTION 2: "Who told you that?"

Genesis 3:11, "He said, 'Who told you that you were naked?'"

Who told you that you were naked? What is the story that is playing out in your mind? Whose voice have you been listening to instead of mine?

"It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly;

who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly..."

- Theodore Roosevelt, *The Man in the Arena*

Every single one of us has our doubts and shame. *You'll never amount. You'll never be good enough. Don't you remember where you came from? Don't you remember what happened to you back there? What you said? What you did? Your spouse left you. Your father abandoned you. What makes you think you could ever be good enough? Who do you think you are?*

If that's you today, God is asking you this question... Who told you that? Who told you you'd never measure up? Who told you, you had to have it all together? Who told you, you should be further along? Who told you God can't redeem your past? Who told you, your sin is too great? Who told you, you're damaged goods? Who told you, God could never use you? Who told you, God could never love someone like you? Who told you, you were naked?"

Romans 8:1

QUESTION 3: "Where are you taking your hunger?"

Genesis 3:11, "Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

What are you chasing in order to satisfy your hunger? To quiet your shame?

There are 2 incredibly dangerous responses to the story of shame:

Danger 1: Agreeing with the shame and never stepping into the arena in the first place. Never daring greatly. Never trusting God for what seems insane in the moment. Never taking risks, always just flying under the radar, always playing it safe.

Think about Peter after his betrayal of Jesus. He goes back to fishing. His old life. The man who courageously stepped out of the boat, got back in it, why? Because of shame. And what does Jesus do? Cooks him breakfast and confronts his shame with him. Frees him from it.

Jesus wants you to open that door to him. The things you've been burying or running from, avoiding and hiding from, He wants to meet you there and love you in the face of the things you think make you the most unlovable.

Danger 2: But the other response that is just as dangerous is living your whole life trying to prove your shame wrong. Trying to quiet your shame through performance or success, or accolades, or trophies, or status, recognition, achievement.

And the truth is we've all developed all kinds of intricate and complex methods to quiet or silence the shame we carry. Busyness, success, or numbing through technology, sex, or substances, people-pleasing, gaming, gambling, compulsive spending.

Even religion makes the best fig leaves. Because we can use God to hide from God. Especially in the south. "Oh, the Lord is good. His mercies are new every morning..." Meanwhile, you're gossiping in order to make yourself feel important to silence your shame, or you've got a secret addiction that you've been using to numb your shame for 15 years. You're using dead, empty religion to hide from God, from others, and even to hide from yourself.

Because you're terrified of what will happen if you unlock that door and invite God into it. But in the midst of Adam and Eve's shame, God goes after them. In the midst of Peter's shame, Jesus goes after him. In the midst of your shame, Jesus is coming for you. He's come to set you free, and to bring you into the fullness of Joy he created you for.

"The defining relational motif for humankind is not that we need to work as hard as we can, or at least harder than we are. It is not to do our best or to guarantee that our children will have a better life than we had. It is not about being right or the acquisition of power. Each of those (and other versions like them) play into the hand of shame's anxiety. No- rather, we were created for joy. Not a weak and watery concept of joy that merely dilutes our sadness and pain. Rather it is the hard deck on which all of life finds its legs, a byproduct of deeply connected relationships in which each member is constantly known."

- Dr. Curt Thompson, *The Soul of Shame*

We've said before, our greatest need is to be fully known and fully loved. But we're terrified that if we're fully known, we won't be loved.

Hebrews 12:2, " ...looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

It is Jesus who frees us from our shame. You are His joy! He gladly endured the cross to free you from your shame, and He is not ashamed of you!

Hebrews 2:10-12, " In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what He suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters."

If that's how he feels about you, bring him into your shame. Let Him do the surgery and the deep soul work that will set you free and bring you into the fullness of Joy he has for you.

Where are you? Who told you that? Where are you taking your hunger? Bring it to Him, and let Him bring you into His joy.

Psalm 16:11, " In your presence there is fullness of joy..."