

Joy // The Face of God

In his book, “Affect Regulation and the Neurobiology of Attachment, Dr. Allan Schore reported findings in his research on the development of the human brain and discovered that the primary way our brain develops and our character is formed is through joy.

Schore defines joy as...

“...being with someone who is glad to be with me.”

- Dr. Allan Schore

He goes on to say that the primary way we interpret if someone is happy to be with us is through their facial expressions. An infant relationally attaches and bonds with a parent through the face and eyes. Adults interpret joy the same way.

This is why in week one of this series we simply asked the question, when you think of God, what expression is He wearing? Do you imagine him being happy? Is he angry? Judging? Disappointed? Is His expression neutral? Uncaring? Or Is He smiling? Disinterested? Joyful? Pleased to be with you?

How many of you are going to be gathering with people over the Christmas season, some of whom you enjoy being around... and others... maybe not so much? You love them, of course. But liking sometimes can be a bit of a different story. You have to muster up a high level of emotional energy and really motivate yourself to engage relationally.

A lot of us think that God responds to us in a similar way— he just tolerates us. And on some level, we think, *God only is with me because He has to be... not because He wants to be.*

But the Christmas story isn't that Christ left His throne, set aside all of His rights and privileges just to sort of begrudgingly tolerate you. The Christmas story is that Christ came to be with you, to save you, and celebrate you. To usher you into a kingdom of joy that will never end that He wants to share with you.

“Joy is the heartbeat of heaven, the very light that emanates from Jesus’ heart, so as we grow closer in relationship with God, we’ll also grow in joy. We’ll see that He is not spending His moments wringing His hands, as we are sometimes prone to do. He is not braced against the future or overcome by serious hardship. His joy is never up for grabs. Rather, His joy is immovable, just as He is. It is an essential part of His very person.

- Stasi Eldredge, *Defiant Joy*

You and I were created in the image of an eternally joyful God. The God who is the creator and source of all joy. He created you for joy. He came to give you joy. He suffered for your joy. He

died for the sake of joy. He lives again for joy, and He's coming back for joy. He's bringing us into an eternal Joy that will never end.

Human beings were created out of the laughter and Joy of the Trinity. This why one of the primary markers of a Christian, a genuine follower of Christ, is joy. Unrestrained, irrepressible, exuberant, ridiculous, resilient, defiant joy in a world deadest on misery and self-destruction.

In Isaiah's prophecy about the coming Messiah. He writes this:

Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone. You have multiplied the nation; You have increased its joy; they rejoice before You as with joy at the harvest, as they are glad when they divide the spoil...For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given..."

John 12:46, "I have come into the world as light, so that whoever believes in Me may not remain in darkness."

Maybe today you feel like you've been remaining in darkness. Maybe your relationship with God has grown distant or cold, or you're carrying grief into the Christmas season and this time of year only amplifies the sorrow. Or maybe as we've talked about joy these last several weeks, you find what's coming up in you is not joy but frustration at your lack of joy, and you don't know why you're not sensing an increase in your joy.

Biblical joy does not mean pretending that everything is okay when it isn't. Biblical joy is not ignorance to the problems of the world, or the struggles of normal life, but it's a deep knowing that behind all the problems and pain there is a redeemer at work in ways that we cannot always see or comprehend.

The opposite of joy is not sadness but hopelessness— having no present and future hope you're your heart to rest in. If there's anything that the Christmas story gives us, it's the fact that you can carry joy with you in the face of heartache, hardship, and the trials of life.

There was a scientific study done in 1975 called the Still-Face Experiment. It was on the relationships of the impact of a parent's facial expressions with their infants. And basically, a parent would get face to face, and play, and engage, and laugh, communicate, and then about a minute in, would just stop responding to their babies' bids for connection, or attempts to communicate with them. And for a brief period of time, they would just maintain a blank stare on their face and not engage with their child. Every single time, almost instantly, the child would get upset, and try to turn away from the parent's face, and get upset, and try to isolate themselves.

The results were the same every single time. When the parent stopped engaging with their facial expressions, the child attempted to turn away, disengage, and isolate from the parent.

Isn't it interesting that one of the primary ways the Bible refers to our relationship with God is through the parent/child relationship? We call Him our Father; He's granted the right to become children of God.

And in light of that dynamic and results from modern Neuroscientific research... all of a sudden it makes sense the priestly blessing over the people of God would say this...

Numbers 6:24-26, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace."

You know what that's describing? JOY! You seeing God being happy to be in your presence. The Joy of God's face shining upon you.

When I first came to Christ, I was so overwhelmed with gratitude and joy that God could love someone like me, that I literally wept for weeks. I could not stop crying. But part of the reason I was impacted so deeply was because of the depth of the darkness of my own past. How undeserving I was of the grace of God. Because of the depth of my sin. Because of the burden of shame I'd been carrying for so long. And once Christ took that burden off of me, like a heavy wet coat I'd been wearing for 10 years, only then did I realize how heavy a burden it actually was. I was overwhelmed with joy.

Not just because I was free. Not just because I was forgiven. But because I had a sense of God's joy and pleasure over me as His son.

I felt lighter, freer, and I had almost no biblical basis for anything I was experiencing at the time, but what I read about in scripture was confirming what I was already experiencing. There was a sense of God's light shining on me, and in me, nothing was hidden, everything about me was known and exposed to God, and to those I was walking with in community. Known and loved by God and by others.

It's like I was almost floating through life. I felt untouchable by the worries and problems and concerns of life because I knew God loved me and was pleased with me, that He wanted to be with me, and I just believed that He was going to work it all out. Have you had seasons like that?

"Assurance goes far to set a child of God free from a painful kind of bondage, and it ministers mightily to his comfort. It enables him to feel that the great business of life is settled, the great debt is paid, the great disease is healed, the great work, a finished work, and all other business, diseases, debts, and works are, by comparison, small."

- JC Ryle

When Nehemiah talks about the joy of the Lord as our strength, this is what He's talking about. It's like God in some way makes you unshakable in the face of every issue you might face in life no matter how daunting or how trivial.

We're invited to find that kind of joy, that kind of resilience, that kind of strength in the joy of the face of God.

Psalm 4:6-7, "Lift up the light of Your face upon us, O Lord! You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound."

Psalm 31:16, "Make Your face to shine upon Your servant; Save me in Your lovingkindness."

Zephaniah 3:17, "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness; He will quiet you by His love; He will exult over you with loud singing."

Another translation says He delights in you; He sings with joyful elation over you. If you're anxious or fearful, His love will quiet and calm you. He rejoices over you.

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

That word presence in the OT would more accurately be translated "in the light of your face." In other words, Psalm 16:11 could be translated "*In the light of your face there is an abundance of Joy.*"

It's why over and over again, in scripture, we're told to seek the face of God, the face of joy! But when we carry shame, we cover up. We don't want to make eye contact. We don't want to see others, and we don't want to be seen by others. We do exactly what the infant does in the face of a parent that won't engage relationally. We isolate from God. We've already decided that God is mad at us, or disappointed, or ashamed.

But that's not who God is. For those of you who feel distant or isolated from God, I promise you, He's not isolating from you.

If you're isolating from God, hiding your face from God, turning away from God, God hasn't turned away from you, God is not ashamed of you. God is lifting up his countenance upon you today. He loves being your Heavenly Father. Don't let whatever you're ashamed of keep you from turning your face toward His. Your Father REJOICES OVER YOU! Delights in YOU... is thrilled to be with you!

"Joy is the foundation of a secure bond with God. When I trust that God is happy to be with me and is smiling at me, this joy naturally removes fear from the relationship."

- Jim Wilder, Michael Hendricks, *The Other Half of Church*

1 John 4:18, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love."

There's this great story about Moses in Exodus 34. Moses had been with God on Mt Sinai, he'd received the 10 Commandments, and he comes down off the mountain, and his face was glowing. His face was radiating the glory of God so much so that Aaron and the Israelites were afraid of him and put a veil over his face because they didn't like it. And whenever Moses would speak with the Lord, he would come down and his face would be shining again, and he was reflecting the glory of God.

Here's what's true... when you do the work, when you're freed from your shame, when you're living in the joy of the Lord, when you're receiving His delight over your life, when His smile shines upon you, guess what? When you're living in the joy of the Lord, you become impossible to control and manipulate.

If you're living in the joy of the Lord, you see the face of God smiling over your life. You will grow like you've never grown before. The emotional and spiritual gets on the fast track... people aren't going to like it, they're going to criticize it, and villainize it, and they're going to do whatever they can do to try to cover it.

Don't let them stop you. God has invited you into His joy, in the presence of Jesus. And He has work for you to do! Step into the arena!

2 Corinthians 3:12-18, "Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away... But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."

Did you know that the more you live in the presence of a God who delights in you, smiles over you, sings and rejoices over you... the more you see His joy for you... as you see His glory... the more you are changed into His image.

This is what God has for you. He wants to shine His joy upon you, smile over you. His glory on you, so that you can reflect His glory to a broken and hurting world that is in desperate need of joy. We know the author and source of joy, we get to live and receive His joy, and we carry and reflect His joy for the broken.

"It is as if Jesus is saying that life in the kingdom with Him is a life of profound joy, a joy that no person and no circumstance can take away. And this blessedness is not reserved for some nebulous future. It is for now! It is the mark of those who have really surrendered to the King and tasted His grace..."

- Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew: The Kingdom of Heaven*

“Once I stare into the face of God, I can stare into the face of anything.”

- Craig D. Lounsbrough

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