

# *Week 2: Cultivate Joy*

Joy. Who wouldn't want this fruit of the Spirit to ripen in their life? Joy is one of my favourite of the fruits but it's one which I've had to work hard to cultivate. I cherish the memory from my time working in student ministry when, as we were sharing characteristics we appreciated in each other, someone said that she appreciated my joy. Wow, this partnership of cultivating the fruit of the Spirit together with God really does work!

This week I share two meditations with you. Along my path of cultivating joy, I've dug into Habakkuk 3 and 1 Peter 1, trying to mine for the treasure which these passages offer. You'll gain the most from these if give yourself a half hour with these, or if you come back to them a couple of times. Read the scripture passage first – remember the slow and thoughtful approach I referred to last week -- and then read the meditation alongside of your open Bible, referring to the passage as you go along. As always, it's not a writer's words which make a passage formative for you. This comes rather as the words of Scripture sink into your heart and connect with your current reality. I encourage you to respond to what you've read in some tangible way. I've provided suggestions for how you can do that, but you might think of a whole different way according to how the Word touches your life.

You might want to start with #2, for this introduces a spiritual practice which I encourage you to practise throughout the whole week. Enjoy the journey!

*Elizabeth*

**CULTIVATE**  
*rooted and built up in Him*

# 1. Uncanny Joy – Habakkuk 3

Tip: Read Habakkuk 3 thoughtfully and with a receptive heart, then read this meditation.

If you give the little book of Habakkuk a read, you may wonder how on earth this prophet could rejoice. His country was to be invaded, the land devastated, and his people taken into slavery, the consequences of repeated turning away from God. The book is full of straightforward questions--questions similar to those we might ask of God today--as Habakkuk grapples with tragic current events. Yet in spite of the circumstances, he expresses an uncanny choice to rejoice in the Lord.

“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 Saviour.” (3:17-18)

What might this passage say if one of us were writing it today? Here’s a try:

“Though job stress and financial pressures are weighing me down,  
though loneliness is too close a companion, and my best plans crumble like clay in my hands,  
though I ache over the suffering around me, and I’m keenly aware of the brevity of life,  
still I will rejoice in my God, I will choose to find joy in my Saviour.”

What a challenge that is! When I consider Habakkuk’s faith and perseverance, I have mixed reactions. Sometimes I’m able to embrace his resolve, and occasionally am able to emulate something like it myself. But more often the cry of my heart is, “I’ll try, Lord, but how? How can I be joyful in the midst of *these* circumstances? How can I be confident that you will relieve my distress? Can I really believe that you will provide? Do it now, Lord!”

## **The Principle of Remembering**

Habakkuk practiced a principle which provides the secret to his overcoming perspective. We see the principle of remembering at work throughout Israel’s history. Sometimes it involved celebrating great historic moments like the Passover, or constructing memorials like the one built from stones taken from the Jordan River while God held the waters back. Other times it involved speaking out the story of God’s faithfulness to younger generations, or declaring the Lord’s love to the troubled in spirit.

Early in chapter 3 Habakkuk prays, “Lord, I have heard of your fame; I stand in awe of your deeds. Renew them in our day.” In doing this, he is recalling the faithfulness of the LORD in the past, and that bolsters his faith. As he looks at his current challenges through the lens of the LORD’s past actions, he is enabled to believe that God will act again. Yes even in those horrible circumstances.

Through that knowledge comes his joy. In that hope comes the ability to rise above his circumstances to say, as he closes his book, “The Sovereign Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.” It seems that Habakkuk’s resolve to respond with joy is the very thing that allows him to reach this exhilarating mountaintop experience. And they are words of inspiration to us who follow that we too can make joy a familiar expression of our hearts no matter what circumstances we encounter.

**Your response:** Think back to a difficult period in your life (or maybe to two or three). Recall how the Lord showed his faithfulness in bringing you through the experience. What did you learn and

how did you grow through it? Thank God for what he did and express your confidence that he will remain faithful in future (or current) trials.

## 2. Cultivating a Grateful Heart

The book of Philippians is sometimes referred to as Paul's epistle of joy. In every chapter Paul assures his friends in Philippi that he is joyful in spite of his circumstances, and he charges them to be joyful also. Turn now to Philippians and read 1:25-26, 2:17-18, 3:1 and 4:4. What do you notice about Paul's perspective on joy? I encourage you to write down your observations.

Some people have a naturally joyful disposition. I have a friend who, after being raised as an atheist, was drawn to faith because she felt so joyful that she realized she needed someone to thank. For me, however, joy is an attitude of the heart which has required intentional cultivation.

I'm intrigued that Paul doesn't hesitate to command his friends to rejoice. Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord! Rejoice always! It is a safeguard for you, he says. A safeguard is a precautionary measure, something which protects us against something which could harm us. That harmful something is entitlement. Entitlement is an attitude or belief that you deserve something, have a right to something. Entitlement fixes your focus on what you feel is lacking in your life. Entitlement breeds dissatisfaction and greed. And it steals joy.

In contrast, gratitude recognizes that everything we have is a gift. The psalmist says, You open your hand and satisfy the desires of every little thing (Ps 145:16). Though God does not give us everything we desire, I've learned to echo John Eldredge's response to this promise when he says: "Not always, not on demand, but certainly more than we deserve." (*The Journey of Desire*)

Practising gratitude as a discipline is a simple but powerful way to make the shift away from entitlement toward joy. Gratitude simply chooses to recognize the gifts of grace for what they are and to express your thanks. I encourage you to practise gratitude every day throughout this week.

Here are just a few suggestions of how you can practise the discipline of gratitude:

- thank God for 10 things before your feet hit the floor in the morning (or, for those who struggle with falling back to sleep, before you have breakfast)
- express gratitude instead of criticism or complaint (to your spouse, child, colleague...)
- sing or whistle a praise song as you go about your daily routine
- choose a routine moment when you will stop to thank God (ie: each trip to the coffee pot or the washroom, whenever you step into your car ...)
- play praise music in your car instead of talk radio ... and turn it off occasionally in order to speak out your own praise

I'm sure you'll come up with more ways to practise gratitude. I'm curious how doing this will increase the fruit of joy in your life. Consider blogging your ideas and experience.

## *3. Isaiah 12*

The whole of Isaiah chapter 12 is a song of praise which responds to the promise of Isaiah 11:1, that a Branch will grow out of Jesse's line who will be the Messiah. Today read this short chapter and then read it again, verse by verse, and response to each verse with your own prayer (see Day 1 of Cultivate Love).

As you do this, notice all of the imperatives Isaiah gives: give thanks, declare, proclaim, sing for joy! Consider how will put one of these into action today.

## 4. Song of Faith - 1 Peter 1:3-9

Tip: Read 1 Peter 1:3-9, taking your time. Then read this meditation stilled turned to the passage.

If the Apostle Peter had been a lyricist, this passage would certainly have found its expression in a song. Overflowing with praise, it's a call to celebrate the wonder and the outcome of faith in Christ.

When I've studied this passage in the past, I've often zeroed in on the verses about enduring trials, finding comfort that there is benefit which emerges from the struggles of life. As I look deeper, I see that Peter's mention of trials is actually a mere parenthesis in his larger celebration of faith.

What jewels of faith are disclosed here? What song does it sing to celebrate belief in the Saviour?

Peter begins by celebrating God's free and marvellous gift of **new birth**. It's a gift with two dimensions which work together to reveal the richness of the gift. The first is that we're granted new birth *into a living hope*, a hope for today as we live out life on earth. Peter's wording reminds us that by God's grace we're granted fullness of life. Fullness often evades us as we live out the 'stuff of life', but it is our birthright in Christ, ours to enjoy as we live in harmony with ourselves, our God and our world.

The second dimension of new birth is the *eternal inheritance* that awaits us in heaven. It's an inheritance so wonderful that it will surely surpass our wildest dreams. No matter how incomplete our picture of heaven, this promise is meant to instil hope and inspire the imagination. Peter doesn't attempt to describe our inheritance but declares its certainty and incorruptibility, and he treasures its worth. The more we grasp of what awaits us, and the closer we get to claiming it as our own, the dearer this promise becomes. Peter's message is one of hope both for today and for eternity. Both are gifts of God's mercy, given in tandem with placing our faith in him. Gifts of great value--and very much worth celebrating!

**Our faith** itself is also a celebration prompter, Peter is sure. Our faith is *precious*--of greater worth than gold. And our faith is *enduring*--once refined, it never perishes. Faith *shields us with God's power* until the day of anticipation arrives. And faith will have a *wonderful outcome* on that day--Not only will it allow us to take hold of the gift that is being kept for us in heaven, but it will also bring praise, glory and honour to the Giver of the gift. When all of this becomes our present reality, our joy will overflow with the incomprehensibility of the riches that are ours.

In light of these treasures, what are the trials that we face? In Peter's view, they are common to life, never catching him by surprise. Enduring them proves our faith genuine, bringing glory to our Saviour, and that is greater by far. His focus is upward, on Christ and his gifts, and that fills Peter's heart with joy.

Wherever you are in your journey today, allow Peter's song to encourage your heart to well up with this same joy. Let his perspective spur you on to celebrate even now as you grasp hold of the fulfilment that belongs with your faith.

**Your response:** Contemplate the scripture passage and the meditation. Then respond to Peter's song of faith with your own celebration of God's gift of new life and the outcome of your faith. You could choose to do that with a spoken or written prayer, but you could also choose to take it further, to express it in a creative expression of praise. Craft a song, draw or paint a picture, write your own psalm, dance in celebration, sculpt a piece of art, anything which expresses your heart in your own creative voice. If you have the opportunity to do this, consider sharing it with a friend, your small group or on the blog.