

Cultivating Joy

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Date: 04 January 2026

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[0 : 00] Have a seat. It's good to be here with you this morning. My name is Dave Nannery. I'm one of the pastors here at our church and glad to worship with you in this new year.

So, yeah, it's been, I think, just two weeks since I was last here, but it feels like forever, doesn't it, with Christmas, New Year's, all these things taking place.

So I want to welcome you all here and let's pray, let's ask God for His guidance and His wisdom as we unfold His Word together.

Father, I thank You that we are gathered again. Lord, we confess that on our own, apart from one another, it is easy to lose sight. It is easy to get discouraged.

We are here to remember together both the commandments and the promises in Your Word. And I pray today that You may help us. Give us a sense of help and direction, especially in this new year, as we start thinking towards new beginnings, a new way of life.

[1 : 07] Lord God, I ask that You would stir up our hearts, each one of us, in just the way that You know we need. That Your Spirit may work among us to begin this work of cultivating joy in our lives.

We thank You, Lord, that we do have much to be joyful for if we have eyes to see it, if we have ears to hear it, if we have hearts to understand it. And so I pray, Lord God, give us those eyes, those ears, those hearts, so that we can hear Your Word and put it into practice.

Lord God, I pray, hold me back from saying anything untrue or anything that is unbecoming of You. And bring to mind what is needed and what is necessary for each one of us.

We submit ourselves to You. We entrust ourselves to You. And we ask for Your help this morning. Amen. Well, right on the heels of Christmas, lots of time with family members, lots of stress, potentially lots of conflict.

Have any of you gotten really upset recently in the last few weeks? Okay, all right. I wasn't asking for a show of hands, but some people feel passionately enough.

[2 : 28] They're like, yes, that's me. I got upset. Wow. No. I know it's impossible with a group like this. Now, whether in the last few weeks, maybe sometime in recent memory, you've been upset, distressed, angry, kind of you feel like you're losing it.

Have you ever had your friends, have you ever had your spouse or your parents give you these just really, really helpful words? Calm down. Calm down.

Boy, isn't that great? Right? Perhaps you had not in that moment, you're like, wow, yes, I had not considered that emotional state of calmness. I had not considered.

Maybe that is a better way of life. And once that loved one issues you that command to calm down, I'm sure you were like, oh, good point.

Click. Click. And you happily turned that switch in your mind from upset to calm. And then you all lived happily ever after. Wow.

[3 : 35] Isn't that great? Just, that's just, that's just the way of Christmas cheer, isn't it? Now, if only that were the way it worked, right? If only there were just a couple simple words that make it all better.

If only there weren't, if only there were a switch you could click in your head. But the problem is, it just doesn't do much good to command someone into a different emotional state, does it?

Have you ever been successful at that? Commanding someone else into a different emotional state. Or has someone else ever been successful at that for you? Just calm down.

Just cheer up. Just stop worrying so much. It's easy to say that. And those are all desirable things, right? But how do you actually do it? That's the tough question.

Then, maybe you think, okay, well, maybe I'll look in the Bible. Maybe I'll find something different than that. But you start reading verses in the Bible that look like they're doing the same thing.

[4 : 39] At first glance, they look like they're commanding you into a different emotional state. Philippians 4, verse 4. Rejoice in the Lord always. Again, I will say, rejoice.

Oh, wow. Yeah, thanks. I've been just really feeling down and gloomy. That's so helpful. But it doesn't stop there. Philippians 3, verse 1. Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 5, verse 16. Rejoice always. Or, you know, is this making you feel better? James 1, verse 2. Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds.

Oh, now you're saying I need to not only rejoice, but even when I'm going through trials, I need to rejoice. It gets better. Matthew 5, verse 12. Rejoice and be glad. For great is your reward in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Oh, yeah, okay, persecution. That's wonderful. Romans 12, verse 12. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in tribulation.

[5 : 36] Be constant in prayer. And on and on and on it goes. The command to rejoice. Found over and over and over throughout Scripture.

Back in November, Chris Mitchell showed us one of those passages talking about joy. BK reminded us of that command to rejoice a week or two later. And maybe you were thinking, how do I do that? How do I heed this call to be happy, to celebrate, to express joy? How do you do it if you're just not feeling it?

How do you do it if you haven't felt it in weeks or months, maybe even years? In Psalm 137, we see people struggling without very question.

The people of Israel, they are living in exile. They are captives in Babylon. Captives of people who have done horrendous things to them. And they are commanded by the very people who killed and destroyed their families.

[6 : 40] Who took them away from their homes. These very people tell them to sing songs of joy for us. What a cruel thing to ask. And they find they just cannot fake it.

In Psalm 137, it begins, By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there, we hung up our lyres.

For there are captors required of us songs. And our tormentors mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How do you sing a happy, joyful, upbeat song when you have a heavy heart?

I've been there before. I remember years ago, at least one occasion, Where I was attending church after a very painful, hard week.

And I just could not sing the worship songs. I just sat there. I couldn't even open my mouth. It felt like my jaw was physically wired shut. Because those songs were so upbeat and I was so downcast.

[7 : 57] I couldn't do it without being a total fake. Yet we are told to rejoice. How do we do that? In order to rejoice, you have to learn what the Bible says about how joy can be found.

You have to learn all about cultivating joy. And one of the best places to learn about cultivating joy is Psalm 126. Psalm 126.

And I invite you to turn in your Bibles to find that. If you are unfamiliar with how the Bible is laid out, The Book of Psalms is the biggest book. It's right in the middle. And you're looking for Psalm 126.

It's a short psalm. And I'll read it for us. Follow along. Psalm 126. A song of ascents.

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter.

[9 : 03] And our tongue with shouts of joy. Then they said among the nations, The Lord has done great things for them. The Lord has done great things for us.

We are glad. Restore our fortunes, O Lord, Like streams in the Negev. Those who sow in tears Shall reap with shouts of joy.

He who goes out weeping, Bearing the seed for sowing, Shall come home with shouts of joy, Bringing his sheaves with him. This is God's word for us this morning.

And this psalm answers the question, How does joy come to us? How does joy come to us? You could rephrase it, How do we find happiness?

And how do we find it together? Not just as individuals, But as a church, as a family. To learn how joy comes to us, We first need to learn where joy comes from.

[10 : 10] Is joy something that you need other people to give you? You need them to be a certain way, To do things for you, So that you can finally have joy.

Do you need them to make you happy? Or perhaps does joy come from inside of you? A sense of confidence and belief in yourself. A sense that you've got what it takes.

A sense that all this goodness in life can come from you. Notice that in Psalm 126, The Jewish people who have returned from exile, These are the descendants of those we read about, Who were so grieved they could not sing songs of joy.

These Jewish people who have returned from exile in Babylon, They tell us where their joy has come from. When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, We were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, And our tongue with shouts of joy. Then they said among the nations, The Lord has done great things for them.

[11:20] The Lord has done great things for us. We are glad. He describes this experience as laughter, As shouts of joy.

This heartfelt sense that all is good. To someone who is in deep despair, Even depression, This might seem like a distant dream.

Something impossible. But for these people, They said, We were like those who dream. These dreams came true.

Where did that joy come from? Three times we are told the answer, The Lord restored the fortunes of Zion. The Lord has done great things.

The Lord has done great things. And so we are glad. Joy comes from the Lord. Joy comes from the Lord.

[12:22] He is the one who gives it. Joy. That is why the Apostle Paul wrote, Rejoice in the Lord. It is a confidence in God Himself.

A confidence that when the Lord comes, He brings joy to the world. he is the one who gives joy it is a gift from him a gift when he is present what that means is you don't need other people to be a certain way for you to be happy if you're living in that dream in that lie that i need people around me to change to behave differently so that i can be okay so that i can be joyful this is not the case even jesus says when people around you could be persecuting you joy is still possible maybe you think i need myself to be different to be happy i need to get shaped up i need to get you know something about me needs to change i need to be improved i need to be everything our culture says you're supposed to be i need to better my state and condition but that's not what this passage says the people these people have come back from exile they couldn't have willed themselves back from exile joy was something that we receive as a gift from god and that is the universal message in the bible that solid lasting joy in life is something that is received from god something beyond momentary fleeting happiness in ecclesiastes chapter 2 we are told there is nothing better for a person than that he should eat and drink and find enjoyment in his toil this also i saw is from the hand of god for apart from him who can eat or who can have enjoyment think of all the things in life that you have enjoyed and just think of the brief moments of joy in your life some of those best moments that brought you deep satisfaction and happiness those moments that felt just right from whose hand did they come who gave you a healthy body good food on your plate a warm home to return to children to enjoy sunshine on a winter day very rare these days but it's good isn't it shining stars in a cloudless night every good and every perfect gift is from above coming down from the father of lights he is the one who gives what you enjoy and he is the one who gives joy itself you have nothing good in life have you experienced that did not come from his hand this is the first answer to the question how does joy come to us the first answer is that joy comes from the lord he is the source he is the giver but we soon find out as we read psalm 126 that his gift of joy is not necessarily a constant maybe if you're young you're expecting i'm going to go off into the world i'm going to grow up take life and life is just going to be a continual growth in joy life is going to be one joy after another and it's going to be this constant but in verse 4 the psalmist said he pleads with god he says restore our fortunes oh lord like streams in the negev now some of your translations might say something like restore us from captivity oh lord and that might seem strange because verse 1 said that he already did he already brought them back from captivity he already restored their fortunes restored them to their land and yet they continue to plead for more to plead that the lord would end the sorrow and grief of their exile it seems they sense that this was only a partial restoration think of that the advent hymn oh come oh come emmanuel that the sense that you we are still mourning in lonely exile until the son of god appears the sense that our exile they've been restored to their land but there's still something missing maybe they longed for more of their countrymen to return and above all longing for god's anointed king to be among them they longed for their barren land to be healthy and strong again for heaven and nature to sing they longed for a kingdom of righteousness to come on earth as it is in heaven when god restores the

fortunes of his people when he fills them with joy verse 4 says it is like streams in the negev now we're living in what is basically a rainforest event and uh these last couple months been a very wet rainforest and so this picture of these streams is maybe it's actually not maybe not quite what you were imagining in your mind because the negev was a region in the south of israel south of uh the land of judah it was a dry land the only vegetation would have been scrub brush there's no streams the negev not the way that we think of them but at certain times of the year rain will fall even in the desert and it's a little like phoenix arizona which i was just down there over christmas and you see that on the screen phoenix is famously hot and incredibly dry for most of the year i honestly do not know why a city got built there it is the hottest place in arizona there are better places in arizona to live and but it's like this bowl where all the heat hits you it is like an oven in the summer people do not go outside during the day in the summer you hide in your little air-conditioned bubbles and it is dry it is a desert there's cactus everywhere but in the winter the rains do come and they come hard and the water runs off the hard ground into streams in places where there were no streams and the city of phoenix is actually littered with what you see on the screen with these water outfalls because what happens is the water pours down on the streets uh on on our on their homes on the highways and it needs to go somewhere and the water has to be channeled through these outfalls into these areas where the earth can absorb it and there in these depressions in these lawns in the in these in these spaces in the in the city where the water flows there the grass turns green there the flowers blossom their life appears in the desert in these rainy times and so it was in the negev the negev was not a land of constant rivers it was a land of seasonal streams when the lord brought rain in its season this land the dry land of the negev would flow with streams vegetation would spring up from the ground grass would appear new life would appear where everything seemed dry and lifeless that same ground that was hard and baked was now soft and producing life and the streams were flowing and from this we learned that joy comes in its season joy comes in its season we are told this also in ecclesiastes chapter 3 that god has made a time to weep a time to laugh a time to mourn and a time to dance there are these seasons and times that god has appointed and we are told this again in psalm 30 verse 5 weeping may tarry for the night the joy comes with the morning all of this calls for patience sorrow and grief have their seasons they do not last forever sometimes you know the funny thing about being in a certain state like that an emotional state is the funny thing about your emotions is every time you have these feelings and you're in this emotional state you always feel like you're going to be in that state forever don't you when you're cheerful and excited you just feel like you're always going to be that way when you're downcast you feel like it's never going to end nothing could be further from the truth it is like streams in the negev these seasons do not last forever and joy too comes in its season and there is a day there's a day that we as christians are always looking forward to a day when the lord will come and joy will be ours forever when he comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found when the streams of the negev never dry up ever again and that is the second answer to the question how does joy come to us joy comes in its season and then finally we reach the beautiful verses that conclude this psalm verses five and six read those who sow in tears shall reap with shouts of joy he who goes out weeping bearing the seed for sowing shall come home with shouts of joy bringing his sheaves with him this is the language of seasons there is a time to sow seeds and then there is a time to harvest what is sown each one is fitting in its time there's a time for tears and there will be a time for shouts of joy the harvest season that these people endured was a time of celebration of joy they held harvest festivals i mean we hold what you know what is actually a harvest festival well that's what thanksgiving is we have this sense that when the harvest comes in it is a time to give thanks it is a time to celebrate it's a time to gather together and enjoy the bounty the goodness that the lord has given to us even though most of us are not farmers yet we still keep this custom do we not blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted that image of sowing and then later harvesting here we learn that what is sown in tears can in the end bring joy we learn that joy comes to those who cultivate it joy comes to those who cultivate it and this is the answer to those commandments to rejoice you may have noticed as we've talked about there there just isn't a switch in your head that you can click on and just start rejoicing to start experiencing joy again any there isn't a switch there any more than there is a calm down switch in your head joy can't be turned on at will by a sheer act of will it simply can't and if you doubt that i ask you have you ever been able to do it joy comes to those who cultivate it that is the third answer to our question how does joy come to us joy comes from the lord joy comes in its season joy comes to those who cultivate it and that leads to a

second question well then how do you cultivate joy how exactly do you cultivate joy joy what's hard is this is a question that if you're like okay what are the specific concrete what's the 10-step process by which i cultivate joy in my life how do i do that how do how do what does god want me to do here's the challenge that this is one of the hard things about preaching sermons is i'm speaking to a large room full of people in a wide variety of different circumstances with all sorts of different troubles stuck in all sorts of different places in life and that means that it's very difficult for me to give specific concrete answers that are going to apply for each one of you and what i tell one person might not be what another person needs to hear that's why we have one-on-one discipleship that's why we do more than just have a sunday morning sermon that's why you need growth groups that's why you need spiritual friends who can meet with you and talk with you and help you gain wisdom for life that's why we do this work of counseling that that i and others in our church do because we can't give you specifics from this pulpit but what i can give you is three principles for cultivating joy three principles that i think are true no matter what your pathway towards joy is no matter how the lord brings you to this place where you can rejoice in him and find joy in what he's given first the first principle is this embrace the good and don't shrink from it embrace the good and don't shrink from it back in november uh chris mitchell he preached on that same subject of joy uh he in that sermon he covered a number of different aspects of joy that that are beyond our scope of what we're talking about today and he turned to nehemiah chapter 8 verses 10 through 12 to talk about that and what a great passage that was it was a good choice that chris made in choosing that one because it gives this picture of how nehemiah is working to cultivate joy in the lives of people who are grieving and when he wants to stir up people's hearts to joy here's what he tells them he he says to them go your way eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready for this day is holy to our lord and do not be grieved for the joy of the lord is your strength so the levites calmed all the people saying be quiet for this day is holy do not be grieved and all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing because they had understood the words that were declared to them now notice it looks like the levites are commanding an emotional state right be quiet do not be grieved but they don't just tell you to be quiet don't be grieved he gives the people something to do eat and drink and give portions to others when we're not experiencing joy we can tend to shrink back from the good things that god has given us the good things he has given us to receive his gifts the good things he has given us so that we can in turn give gifts to others and nehemiah urges the people don't shrink back from that you're going to be tempted as you grieve to just simply not eat not drink and just isolate yourself from others instead he says do the opposite eat drink send portions it is holy to the lord to embrace the good that he has given to us the book of ecclesiastes offers similar counsel to embrace what the lord has

[28 : 47] allotted to you whatever it may be in this life whatever good it is and this truth extends to every good and perfect gift that comes from above i often find that it's true isn't it when when life seems dry of joy and i see this tendency in myself and i see in so many other people we just close ourselves off to the means of god's grace we no longer embrace the things that cultivate joy that is why hebrews 10 verses 24 and 25 warns us let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near embrace love and good works come to church don't don't hide out at home don't run off into the mountains when you can be present with god's people sing and pray and listen take communion together speak encouraging words to others even when you're struggling to find joy yourself embrace the good don't shrink from it that's the first principle for cultivating joy the second principle is similar keep showing up to plant seeds keep showing up to plant seeds go out to the fields weeping sow seeds in tears if that's where you're at but keep showing up in galatians 6 verse 8 we read the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption but the one who sows to the spirit will from the spirit reap eternal life which field are you going to sow seeds in a field of handling life the way that you are familiar with and that you best you know how maybe a field of self-indulgence or a field of avoidance or a field of placing demands on others in that field what springs up will be corruption but if you sow to the spirit sow to this field where you are relying and depending on god the holy spirit on his power on his work you are showing up to receive this these means of grace the pre his his his word the prayer with our fellow believers the encouragement we receive communion we celebrated in church when you were receiving these things you reap eternal life joy forever and ever this principle of sowing and reaping even the pagan philosophers know this you become they they point out that you become what you

habitually do the choices that you make again and again and again the habits that you build into your life the structures that you create in your life and in the life of your family in the life of our church they shape who we become if you wish to be a happy person don't just try to be happy cultivate habits that lead to happiness in the lord not one time wow experiences mountaintop things not one week retreats habits practices disciplines you keep showing up have others encourage you in this practice do it together with them one of the things i do the most in counseling is helping people find the right habits that help them cultivate joy and learn to stick with them sometimes people what they want in counseling

is to be blasted with a new insight that all of a sudden fixes everything in their life and that's not really the way it goes it's more along the lines of finding where we're stuck developing habits disciplines and practices that help sustain a new way of life and plant seeds that can then one day be harvested the work of sowing seeds it is not a work of instant gratification which means it's very hard in our culture where we're geared towards nothing but instant gratification if you're not feeling good instantly there's something horribly wrong but this work of sowing seeds means waiting it means persistence when jesus teaches on prayer he urges persistence that's what what he means when he says pray without ceasing he's like don't stop keep going and so it is with all good spiritual habits and disciplines alongside your fellow christians you keep showing up to plant seeds that's the second principle for cultivating joy and then there the third and final principle is this you trust god to bring joy in his time trust god to bring joy in his time you are not in control here you do not control when and how the harvest comes so many of us what we want is a neat tidy process that automatically produces joy when i expect it to how i expect it to and that is not the way god's kingdom works if you have any doubt about that literally read anything in the bible does does do god's people ever find a way to mechanically manipulate god to produce exactly what they want when they want no that's the way the pagans related to their gods this mechanical i'll you scratch my back i'll scratch yours you will do for me exactly what what i want when i want and i'll be happy in the ways that i want that make sense to me no that's not the way it ever works in scripture and that's not the way it works in our life either god works in surprising and mysterious ways and in surprising and mysterious times he brings the harvest the time he appoints in his season in his time and it's not our place to tell him when and it is not in our power to force his hand consider this parable from jesus in mark chapter 4 he said the kingdom of god is as if a man should scatter seed on the ground he sleeps and rises night and day and the seed sprouts and grows he knows not how the earth produces by itself first the blade then the ear then the full grain in the ear but when the grain is ripe at once he puts in the sickle because the harvest has come this is a parable about waiting and trust it turns out jesus is speaking to people who also live in a culture of instant gratification they expect the kingdom of god to appear immediately now that god's messiah has come they expect all the fullness of the kingdom is now here it's got to be now here it's got to be tomorrow right no that's what this parable is about the work of a farmer is a work of waiting you may plant the seed you cannot force it to grow you can't take that little seed and you know pull the sprout out of it

and you know stretch it until it produces the full grown grain that you can harvest rather the earth produces by itself the farmer knows not how what he does know is that there will be a day when at once he gets to harvest a day to reap with shouts of joy a day when he shall come home with shouts of joy bringing his sheaves of grain with him that is the way the kingdom of god works it is not a kingdom that we can force or command or control or manipulate it is a kingdom in which we work faithfully and we entrust ourselves and we entrust our work to god the seeds we plant we entrust to god to bring joy in his time and so the apostle paul writes in first corinthians chapter 15 therefore my beloved brothers be steadfast immovable always abounding in the work of the lord knowing that in the lord your labor is not in vain and he summarizes everything we've said in galatians 6 verse 9 when he reminds us let us not grow weary of doing good for in due season we will reap if we do not give up that is how you cultivate joy you embrace the good you don't shrink from it you keep showing up to plant seeds you trust god to bring joy in his time if you have put your faith in jesus christ then there is a day of endless joy coming for you that hymn joy to the world you know that is not actually a christmas song it is not a song about jesus first coming it is about his second coming joy to the world the lord has come let earth receive her king that is a song looking forward to the future our future there is a day coming when the lord will bring you a restored joy of life there is a day coming when your mouth will be filled with laughter and your tongue with shouts

of joy there is a day when everyone around us will say the lord has done great things for us a day coming when we will say let earth receive her king the lord has done great things for us we are glad let me pray father we look forward to that day when christ returns and everything is made right when the driest lands are watered by the river of life that never ceases to flow but grows deeper the farther it flows when abundant life comes the day when all the things that bring us sorrow and grief are swept away lord that day is not today we still mourn in exile sorrowful yet always rejoicing because our king has come and yet he is yet to come fully we look forward to his coming again and in this moment as we have his spirit as we get these little glimpse these little tastes of the joy that is yet to come lord would you give us more i pray lord there are many of us here today who feel dry who feel parched who feel in that season of deep sorrow of terrible grief some who struggle with these depths of depression and despair for whom it is hard to see any good oh lord give us eyes to see give us hearts to receive and give us a persistence patience in knowing how we show up to receive to plant seeds to receive grace to wait for your timing to entrust ourselves to you oh lord god we are in your hands and our time is in your hands have mercy on us lord god and let us find happiness and joy again amen