

OPEN YOURSELF TO JOY

John Maxwell was a pastor in California for many years
and now teaches and writes books on leadership.
I heard him once talking about a time that his wife Margaret and he
were being interviewed for a Christian magazine.

The interviewer asked Margaret;
Does John made you happy.
Knowing what a great husband he was,
John leaned back in his chair
waiting for a long stream of accolades,
only to be shocked when he wife said,
No, John doesn't make me happy.

She waited a moment and then said,
John is a great husband but he doesn't make me happy.
He can't.
Only I can decide if I'm going to be happy.

After hearing that years ago,
I have asked people: Can God make you happy?
Every time the answer is: Yes, of course.

And every time I reply: I don't think so.
God can give you everything you need to be happy:
the forgiveness of your sins,
the presence of His Spirit in your life,
the power to overcome your challenges, and
the promise of eternity with him.
But whether you respond with happiness and joy –
that's up to you.

Nearly two thousand years ago in his letter to the Philippians
Paul wrote these words.

Philippians 4.11-12: I have learned to be content whatever the
circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what is to have
plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation,
whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.

What's interesting to me here is Paul's honesty.
He says I have learned the secret of being content.
He says:

being at peace and living with joy was not my natural condition.
It wasn't my natural condition before I met Jesus on the Damascus Road.
And guess what,
It wasn't my natural condition after I met Jesus.

I had to learn to be content.
Christ made it possible for me to be at peace and live with joy.
But it wasn't automatic.
I had to learn how to do it.

Paul wrote: I have learned the secret of being content in any and every
situation.

If you know anything about Paul,
You know that he had a knack for getting into any and every situation.
Five times he was given thirty-nine lashes.
Three times he was beaten with rods.
Three times he was shipwrecked.
Once he was stoned by an angry mob and left for dead.
And on many occasions he went without food and water.

In fact when he writes these words to the Philippians
he is in prison.
He is waiting to stand trial,
knowing that he may be sentenced to death.
And to make matters worse,
Most of the people he has counted on in the past have deserted him.

There in prison Paul wrote a letter to the church in Philippi.

Four little chapters.

But today, 20 centuries later commentators refer to it as Paul's epistle of joy.

15 times in these four short chapters

Paul writes of his joy

Or calls upon the Philippians to rejoice.

I read Paul's words about learning the secret of being content in any situation and I have two reactions.

1. I get excited.

It means you and I can learn to live with joy.

Joy isn't something either you're born with or you're not.

It's a trait that can be learned and cultivated.

Second reaction:

2. I get frustrated.

Nowhere in his letter to the Philippians does he tell us what the secret is.

I want to say,

Paul, brother, come on, please.

You've got what I need.

You've got what the world is desperately seeking.

Give it to us,

just as plain as you can.

You should write a book.

You can call it: Joy for Dummies.

It'll be a best seller.

But Paul doesn't tell us his secret for joy –

not in so many words.

But if we look at what he wrote to the believers in Philippi,

I think we can come pretty close to Paul's formula for opening ourselves to joy.

I think the first thing he would tell us is
To open ourselves to joy,

First We must

Open Our Arms and Embrace the Fact that Life is Hard.

If you want to be happy, I think Paul would tell you, expect life to be a struggle.

Somehow we've gotten it into our heads,
 that if we're having problems,
 we must be doing something wrong or
 someone else must be doing something wrong.

Our subconscious assumption is that life is supposed to run smoothly.
 It's suppose to follow the schedule we've set for it
 and work itself out according to our predetermined plans.

And if life's not doing that,
 then something must be wrong.

I'll tell you what's wrong.
 It's the expectation that life will be and should be easy.

Most people will tell you they don't believe that.
 But when life becomes difficult,
 listen to them and you'll hear them say --
 Why is this happening to me?
 What have I done to deserve this?
 Why is – fill in the blank –
 my job,
 my marriage,
 raising kids,
 so stinkin' hard?

Why is life hard?
Let me give you some reasons.

1. You're a physical being.

Over time all things physical break down, wear out and stop working.
And when you are that physical thing
that breaks down, wears out and stops working,
that makes life hard.

2. You're connected to other people.

That will bring you joy and be your greatest blessing.
But it also means that
at times your friends will fail you – and that hurts.
Your enemies will attack you – and that hurts.
People you've helped will forget you.
People who don't know you will hear and believe the worst about you.
And, maybe worst of all, the people you love will suffer physically and
emotionally,
and try as you might,
there will be times when you can't make them better.

And because you love people,
because you care,
that will make your life hard.

Third reason.

3. You're a difficult person.

Anyone ever tell you that?
Well, you are,
and it's time someone told you:
You're a difficult person.

And what I mean by that is that
you make life more difficult for yourself than it has to be.

You worry about things you don't need to worry about.
You feel guilty when you don't need to
and you refuse to address problems that would go away
if you would just turn around and face them.

You act before you think.
You get angry about things that don't matter.
You think the world is out to get you when it's not.
And you get your feelings hurt
over things you should just laugh off.

You are a mess.
I love the quote:
"Coping with a difficult person is always a problem, especially when
the difficult is yourself."
And to make certain you didn't miss it,
I'll say it again: you are a difficult person.

4. You live in a world that's unfair.

Bad things happen to good people.
Whether it's by accident or by the evil intentions of others,
you and the people you love will suffer the pain of unfairness during
your lifetime.

Life for all human beings is unpredictable, uncontrollable and full of
problems.

Expect life to be hard.
Expect marriage to be hard.
Expect parenting to be hard.
Expect growing old to be hard.

And when you are cheated, overlooked or mistreated;
 When you hurt and those you love are suffering,
 Don't feel like you've been singled out,
 Don't feel that life or God owes you an explanation.
 Here's your explanation –
 You're a human being
 and human existence is hard.
 It's a struggle.
 It always has been and it always will be.

Why do I think Paul would tell us to expect life to be difficult?
 Because in all of his writings,
 we don't find one word of self-pity.
 There's not one instance where he cries out:
 Life is unfair; I deserve better than this.
 In prison for preaching the Gospel,
 He doesn't write:
 God, why do you allow me to be whipped and beaten?
 Why do you let me god hungry and cold
 When all I'm trying to do is be faithful?

When I was a freshman in college, Edward “Ted” Kennedy, Jr., was diagnosed with bone cancer. He was only twelve years old at the time. To save his life, his right leg was amputated. Cards, letters, phone calls, and telegrams came from all over the world to console him and his family. The Kennedys had suffered so much, including the assassination of two of Ted Jr.'s uncles, and the outpouring of love was overwhelming. Most of the messages carried similar sentiments of compassion and sympathy: “We are praying for you,” “We love you,” “Our hearts hurt for you.” One, however, was very different. It came from a former Green Beret. He sent the boy his green beret along with a message intended to give him heart. In the message he included these simple and direct words: “It's a man's journey. Get on with it.”

Those may not be the words you or I would have sent, but they are important words for all of us to hear when we are in a wilderness. Life is hard, and it's hard for everyone. And those of us who have the idea that we will escape life's problems or that we are owed an explanation when we suffer pain and loss will fail to learn the lessons that the wilderness has to teach us. Life is not a child's game; it's a difficult journey. It won't go easy on any of us, and we shouldn't expect or want it to.

What did Paul write to the Philippians?

Philippians 1.29-30: It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict you saw and now hear to be mine.

What is life?

Paul says it's a conflict.

It's hard all the time.

But decide that you're going to follow Jesus,

decide that there's a higher calling on your life than

being liked by others and becoming affluent,

and you'll start swimming against the flow of how others think and act.

Decide that you're going to live for Christ in a world that lives for self,

decide that you're going to live for your principles

in a world that will sell its soul for pleasure,

and you can expect to be misrepresented, mistreated and maligned.

Do you want to open yourself to the joy?

Then expect life to be a battle.

And decide that true happiness is not living easy

but living well.

2. Open Our Minds to What is Good.

Two key insights for peace and contentment:

1. You can control your thought-life.

2. You must control your thought-life.

If you want to be miserable,
 it's the easiest thing in the world to do.
 Simply dredge up the things that make you unhappy,
 And chew on them over and over like a cow with its cud.

Things in the past that went wrong.
 Things in the present that are going wrong.
 Things in the future that could go wrong.
 Things someone said to you.
 Things someone did to you.

Think about everything that's wrong and you'll never feel right.
 Focus on everything that's bad and you'll never feel good.

But if you want to know peace and be content,
 You'll need to control your thought life.

Philippians 4.8: Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right,
 whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything
 is excellent or worthy of praise – think about these things.

It sounds like trite advice,
 But you'd be surprised how many people need to hear it.
 If you want to live full of joy,
 fill your mind with the thoughts that that bring joy.

In the Bay of Naples, Italy,
 A jellyfish called the Medusa and a snail of the nudibranch family live
 together.
 When the snail is small, a jellyfish will sometime swallow it and draw it into
 its digestive tract.
 But the snail is protected by its shell and cannot be digested.

The snail fastens itself to the inside of the jellyfish,
And can you guess what it does?
It goes to work and by the time the snail is fully grown,
It has entirely consumed the jellyfish that consumed it.

Get the point: Be careful what you put into your mind.
Because it will consume you.

Fill our minds with things that are pure and beautiful and good,
and soon our hearts are filled with purity and beauty and goodness.
And over time our lives become pure and beautiful and good.

But fill our minds with thoughts that are critical and mean and unhealthy
and before long we are critical and mean and unhealthy.

Years ago at another church,
one of my parishioners, a young mother in her 30's
made an appointment to see me.

She was unhappy with her life.
Money was tough,
her kids were wearing her out,
there were other things that weren't what she wanted them to be.

After detailing all the things she wished were different,
she concluded by saying, "I just wished I had the life that Joan has."

Of course, she wished she had Joan's life.
Just about anyone would.

Joan had married into a wealthy family to an easygoing man
who was respected by everyone who knew him.
She had a dream home on forty acres of land.
She wore the finest clothes and was physically attractive.

Her children were grown and successful.
They lived close enough for her that she could
see her grandchildren as often as she desired.
She had it all.

"I just wish I had the life that Joan has,"
said the young woman in my office.
"Then I'd be happy."

She would have been surprised had I told her
that Joan's husband had sat in the same chair she was sitting
in just two weeks earlier.
He had come to see me because nothing in the world made Joan happy.

"She's just miserable, all the time," he told me.
"Nothing is ever good enough for her. She always finds
something wrong with everything – even with the kids.
It's like she's looking for reasons to be unhappy. I've
tried everything," her husband said. "I want to help her
but I don't know how." He ended by saying, "Rob, if it
wasn't for my commitment to Christ, I'd be here telling
you that I was getting a divorce."

After counseling with literally hundreds of persons and couples,
I've learned that it's not the people with the fewest problems
who have the most joy.
And it's not the people with the most blessings
who experience the greatest happiness.
The people who are most content are the ones
who focus on what's good in their lives and
who refuse to look for and fixate on the negatives.

Do you want to be content?
Then look for the good.

If you want to be unhappy in your marriage,
look for,
focus on what's wrong with your spouse.
You'll find something
if you want to.
And it will make you miserable.

If you want to be unhappy concentrate on what's wrong with
 your spouse
 your children
 your job
 your church,
 the people you meet,
 the place you live.
 and even with yourself.

Or you can open your mind to what's good in
 your spouse
 your children
 your job
 your church,
 the people you meet, and
 the place you live.

And if that's what you're looking for,
 that's what you'll find.
 And in the process you will discover how blessed you are
 and how happy you can be.

Third we need to

3. Open our Mouths with Thanksgiving

Back to Paul's letter from prison to the Philippians.

Philippians 4.6: Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God.

Maybe the greatest hindrance to happiness is the idea that something out there will make me content.

When we move to a larger house,
 Then I'll be happy.
 When my father finally says he's proud of me,
 Then I'll be happy.

When I get married ... then I'll be happy.
 Shortly after that, it's when my spouse changes,
 THEN I'll be happy.
 When I get that next promotion,
 That next big raise,
 The recognition I deserve ... then I'll be happy.

Some thing,
 Some change,
 Some person – that's what I need to be happy.

Do you know what can bring you more joy right now
 Than getting something you don't have?
 Being grateful for what you already have.

Opening your mouth and being thankful for what's already yours.

Dale Carnegie was once interviewed by television producer and anthologist
 Leonard Safir.

Saffir asked Carnegie:
 What's the secret to being happy.
 In the course of the conversation,
 money came up.
 How much money did it take to be happy?

Carnegie wanted to know if Saffir thought a million dollars
 would make him happy.

Sure, of course, the reporter responded.

Carnegie pressed on.
 Would you sell both your eyes for a million dollars?
 No, the interviewer responded.
 How about one of your legs – one million dollars?
 No? How about a hand?
 Or your hearing?
 Still no?

I just offered you a million dollars four times
 and each time you told me you'd rather keep what you already have.
 "Add up what's already yours
 and you'll find that you wouldn't sell it for all the gold in the world.
 The best things in life are yours already."

Why do we think that some thing we don't have will make us happy,
 when we already have things much more valuable
 and we are unhappy.

Let me ask you:

What would you take in exchange for your health?

What's more important to you than your children?

How valuable is it to you

to live in a country where you're still free to speak your mind
 and do what you desire?

What price would you put on your salvation?

The best things in life are yours already.
 Right now you have more than enough to be grateful
 and full of joy.

Yesterday was the 76th anniversary
 of one of the most memorable moments in sports history.
 Anybody know what I'm referring to?

July 4, 1939.

Yankee Stadium.

Lou Gehrig, The Iron Horse,

lifetime batting average of .340,

2130 consecutive games,

acknowledged to the crowd that he had ALS,

a disease that would leave him paralyzed

and helpless, unable to move, speak or move.

Two years later he would succumb to the disease that now bears his name.

Here's how he began his speech:

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“Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about a bad break. Today, I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”

He went on to say:

“When the New York Giants, a team you would give your right arm to beat and vice versa, sends you a gift, that's something. When everybody down to the groundskeeper ... remember(s) you with trophies, that's something. When you have a father and mother work all their lives so that you can have an education and build your body, it's a blessing. When you have a wife who has been a tower of strength and shown courage than you dreamed existed, that's the finest I know. So, I close in saying that I might have had a bad break, but I have an awful lot to live for.”

Here's a promise I can make to you:

Become fixated on what you don't have
and unhappiness will flood your life.

But become grateful.

Open your mouth daily in thanksgiving for just a tenth of the blessings you
already have
and you will discover a depth of joy that will surprise you.

4. Open our hearts to the reality that God is at work in you right now.

Paul believed that God knew him and
that God loved him.

Paul believed that God was committed to him and
that God was at work in his life.

And he told the Philippians to believe the same thing.

Philippians 2.12-13: Be even more careful to put into action God's saving work in your lives ... for God is working in you ...

When things get hard, Paul says,
 Don't give up.
 Don't give in and
 Don't get down.

Why?
 Because God is working in you.

Look at the lives of history's great men and women
 and you will find that almost all of them had times when they were
 tempted to give up their dreams, throw in the towel, and live small
 lives.

That's true in the secular world
 And that's true of men and women who accomplished great things in the
 Bible.

Here's another common denominator.
 Most of those men and women
 would tell you that it was during those difficult times
 that they learned the lessons that prepared them for their later success.

It was in the furnace of their trials,
 that their faith was forged.
 It was in the midst of their struggles
 that their faith was strengthened.
 It was in the times when they wondered where God was
 that later they looked back on
 as the moment when God was doing his greatest work in their lives.

Malcolm Muggeridge lived one of the most interesting lives of the 20
 century.

During World War 2 he was a British soldier and spy.

Later he was a journalist and author.

At one time a communist sympathizer,
 he became a staunch anti-communist.

And late in life,
 after covering the work of Mother Teresa,
 formerly agnostic,
 he committed his life to Christ.

Look what he said:

Malcolm Muggeridge: I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my seventy-five years that has truly enhanced and enlightened my existence has been through affliction, not happiness.

Hard times can make us stronger.
Suffering can make us wise.
Going without can make us appreciate all we have.
Trials can make us more like Christ.

I want to invite you to believe what Paul believed about God.
You are not in this world alone.
There is a divine power and a divine person,
 who is committed to you.
And he wants you to succeed at what matters most even more than you do.
And he's at work in you,
 wanting to teach you lessons,
 and give you strength,
 and create in you the character that's needed to succeed at
 what matters most in life.
And many times it's hard to see that.
 And sometimes it's hard to believe that.

But it's true.
And when you believe that and trust that
 it brings a strength into your life that can bear any burden,
 stand up to any trial, and
 find joy in any circumstance.

5. Open our Eyes to See our Purpose.

I can tell you that many people are unhappy and unfulfilled
 because the purpose they're living for is too small.
They've sold themselves short.
And there's something in them that yearns for more.
There's something in them
 that wants to make a difference.
We've said it so often it sounds old hat.
But there's something within us that wants lives that are significant,

not just successful.

There are many ways to describe what our purpose is.
Here in Philippians, Paul describes it like this:

Philippians 2.15: You are to live clean, innocent lives as children of God in a dark world full of crooked and perverse people. Let your lives shine brightly before them.

Why are you here?

Paul says, it's to bring light to people who are in darkness.

People who are lost and lonely.

People who are hurting and desperate.

People who are struggling and longing for hope.

Care enough about those people to enter their world,

And with your words and your deeds bring light into their lives.

Robert Fulghum and Alexander Papandreas

If you want to know joy,

not just happiness,

but the deep contentment that we call joy,

then you'll have to discover your purpose and fulfill it.

You'll have to live for something big and deep.

Something that brings hope and help and understanding and life to
people who are in the darkness.

Take it on,

And it will not make your life easy.

But it will make your life good.

And you will no longer have to run off looking for joy,

Because joy will have found you.