



# Auburn Presbyterian Church

*Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual*

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## **“Got Joy?”**

### **Hebrews 12:2-3; James 1:2-8**

One of the difficulties pastors face when planning worship is the reality that people come in those doors in a wide variety of conditions. Some people love to worship God, and they’ll be here as often as possible, no matter what is going on in their lives or in the world. (Thank You, God, for these faithful ones!) Some folks come out of habit; they were raised to go to worship on Sundays. (Thank You, Lord, for the early training of these saints!) Some people come in the doors as investigators, spectators--checking out our church as they “church shop” in their new community. (Lord, guide these people to the right church home that will help them grow in their love for you and other people You love!) Some come because they have been hurt by another church, and they haven’t tried—or cannot—work it out with those folks, so they’re “gone” from there, and looking for a different church home. (Lord, bring healing to these who have been hurt by people who bear Your name!) Some folks come beaten up by life, disappointed in love, recently fired from work, rejected by family, failing at a venture in which they had invested heavily. (Thank You, Lord, for these who have summoned up the courage to come to You with us this morning. Speak to them of Your love today!)

How is a pastor supposed to design a worship service that meets these needs of all these folks, a prayer that lifts up each one, a sermon that meets every need? It’s not humanly possible.

But there’s one pretty safe bet—everyone who walks through those doors could use more joy in their life. Have you ever met anyone who could not stand more joy?

This is Beverly (Bev) Talbott. Bev and her husband Glen were part of our Church Family pretty early in our history. Bev has always had a heart for God, and wanted to be in ministry. She saw her life as ministry, extending the love of Jesus to others. But as a full-time mother living in Meadow Vista, she was not going to pick up her life and go to seminary for four years; that was not going to happen, for a lot of reasons. So when I told her about a new program called, “Commissioned Lay Pastor”, and said our Presbytery was about to provide training for church members who had a heart for ministry, she jumped at the chance, taking



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a number of classes locally, often in a condensed schedule. She was examined by Presbytery and commissioned to serve our little Presbyterian congregation in Corning, north of here on I-5.

Like a lot of small rural congregations, the church at Corning had been struggling for some time. They could no longer afford to pay a full-time pastor, and that had been a real blow to the congregation. As is common to declining groups that are already small, they had a very low self-esteem. Their response to most any new idea was, “We can’t do that.” They had adopted a “fortress mentality”, hoping that people in town would find them and enjoy the things they had always done together. “As it was in the beginning, it is now and ever shall be...”

Every weekend, Bev would travel up to Corning, stay in one of the motels by the highway, meet with church leaders, call on the sick, and lead worship. Bev’s love for Jesus was contagious. One of her first statements to the congregation was, “Whatever we do this year, we are going to have fun!”

This was not “church” the way they had known it. Bev brought her guitar, taught the group some simple choruses, spent time with the kids, met other church pastors and members in the community, and started a number of local mission works. I don’t think the churches of Corning had ever cooperated on projects like “Jesus in the Park”, and “Project Celebrate” that she brought about there. New people began to come to the church. There was a youth confirmation class; there were baptisms. Bev cultivated a new spirit among the leaders. And above all, the church had fun. Here she is, giving farewell gifts to the church so that their ministry of fun will continue for a long time.

Why is this such a strange experience for so many Christians? How do people get more joy in their lives? That’s what I want to invite you to join me in discovering this morning, as we listen to God’s Word in Scripture.

Open your Bibles to the book of Hebrews, which is located toward the back of your Bibles in the New Testament just before the little letters of Peter, James and John. Listen with me for God’s Word to US TODAY, as I read these words aloud. *[text: Hebrews 12:2-3]*

My friends, God tells us that Jesus was all about joy! He endured all he endured, because of the joy of what he could accomplish. So, how can we get this joy? You probably know what I'm going to say: connect with God! Follow Jesus!

Clinton Arnold is a Bible scholar writing in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. He had to conclude his article on joy this way: "The life of discipleship is a life of increasing joy—joy not only in growing in the faith . . . but in helping others grow in the faith." (Clinton E. Arnold in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, pg. 1023)

There is joy in the freedom we have in Christ—no guilt or cringing in God's presence, but confidently coming before God's throne of grace. Instead of the "same old, same old" life, in Jesus we have a life of purpose and significance. In place of grief and futility, we have the companionship of the One who promised to be with us to the very end.

Early this past week, my brother in Kansas City wrote me an email about the sister of a friend who is dying of cancer, and who lives over in a Missouri town in that metro area. He wanted to connect with one of my minister friends in his area, to bring some comfort to that family. He said, "They're atheists, but spiritual." [Don't you just love that?!] So I left word for Bryan, one of the kids from my youth group there years ago who is ordained in the Covenant Church, and who started a new congregation in Johnson County, Kansas. Bryan got in touch with my brother, and then drove all the way over to visit with this family and their caregiver. After getting acquainted, Bryan pointed out to them that most college-educated people in this country have spent an estimated \$220,000 on their minds, and will spend about \$400,000 on their bodies—food, medical care, gym memberships. He asked, "How much have you invested in your spirits?" The answer was obvious—not much.

Bryan had a suggestion. What if this patient, her sister, and the caregiver--and maybe even my brother--would pick one evening a week, have a great meal together, watch one of the tapes from The Alpha Course, and then talk about it? It would be a good investment, Bryan said, in their neglected spirits.

They seemed to think that was a great idea, so Bryan drove back, delivered a set of Alpha tapes, and is praying—as am I—for my brother and these gals to meet Christ through The Alpha course, which (many of you know) is a college-level introduction to Christian faith.

When Bryan called me to report back, he told me this was one of the best pastoral calls he had ever made. As he told me about all this, my breath left me; I couldn't say anything for a moment. I thanked Bryan for doing what I could not

do from here, and promised I would be praying for this whole crew. Whatever it takes, I want my brother to connect with God in a life-changing way, and enJOY what I enjoy. This is so awesome! Joy is so close to all of them!

The other scripture this morning about joy is more of a challenge. Just after the book of Hebrews, find the little letter of James (who was the brother of Jesus, you know). This passage comes from chapter one. Listen again for God's voice. [*Jas 1:2-8*]

How can you “count it all joy” when you're “in the pits”? Now, wait a minute. Is that what James is saying? Look again. The “trials” James is writing about are the temptations and distractions that press us to put aside the things of God.

Maybe another example will help. Jesus said in his ministry, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” (Matthew 16:24, NIV) Now I hear people say, “I guess that's just the cross I have to bear”, and they're referring to the care of a sick spouse, or paying out money for a child's bail from the county jail, or putting up with an abusive boss. Each of those may be significantly difficult, but those have nothing to do with taking up your cross. Those are just part of life. People of faith get hit with such things, and so do people without faith. You can only have a cross if you're following Jesus, and the cross is crucifying yourself to accomplish the same things Jesus did then and God is doing now, to bring in the Kingdom of God. Do you see the difference? A tough life situation might be cross-bearing if God has called you specifically to that life situation, if God has given you a clear message about a task you are to do there. Other than that, it's just life. It can't be cross-bearing unless God has given you a nudge beyond just coping with it.

God wants to redeem oppression and make justice between people. Because of that, God asks his people to do more than just cope with life like everyone else. God has a “whole ‘nother agenda” than just coping, or being nice under pressure.

By this standard, most Christians have not started to live the with-God life yet.

I know a Roman Catholic priest who left set aside his holy orders to marry a woman. We hear about that from time to time. But my friend's situation was different. This woman had a terminal illness, and a daughter to care for. My friend married this gal, moved in, provided care for his new wife and fathering for her daughter. When his wife died and he had healed from his grief, he resumed his priestly vows and continues to serve Christ in that way to this day. THAT's a calling! THAT's love in action.

The “trials” which James identifies are the pressures to abandon those extra instructions from God, to “ditch” the mission God has called you to. When THOSE pressures come, it’s because our Enemy is afraid you are going to be effective, afraid that he’s going to lose more ground to God because of you. So he stirs up circumstances and people (often without their awareness) to press you with the ordinary things of life, hoping you’ll cave in and leave him alone to do his thing. The “trials” are a sign of our Enemy’s distress. So rejoice when those pressures come, the Bible says, because you have become a big threat to the Enemy! You are on God’s side, beating down the gates of hell and freeing captives!

If you’re working with God on God’s agenda, that’s how you can have joy when the pressure’s on. This is not denial about how tough life can be, putting on “a faithful front” for appearance’s sake. No, the situation may be rotten. But you also know there’s more going on than the casual observer can see, and it’s that spiritual battle that can be a source of joy and encouragement to “hang in there”.

This is the secret of the Afro-American Church. For centuries in this country, African-Americans’ lives were dreary and often desperate. Coming to worship God, gathering as a church, they rehearsed their sorrow, they celebrated the joy of persevering, they danced with the Spirit of God lifting them up. By comparison, so much of worship in our Anglo congregations is pretty dull, and does not communicate well to younger people. Here’s a track that someone from Willow Creek Community Church wrote, to lift our spirits and turn them to God. (“Mourning into Dancing” CD cue)

Can you see us coming forward for Communion some Sunday, with this celebration music booming from the speakers? Communion is to be “the joyful feast of the people of God”—a made for us at great cost, because of our God’s incredible love for us. How could we “stay silent” in such an occasion??!

This points us to one of the secrets about worship and the key to life in Christ: joy starts in praising God. Turning toward God lifts us out of our focus on our own problems, and turns us to the One who loves us, regardless. When we actively praise God together, our mood changes; what we do drives how we feel. Who would want to miss such a weekly joy event, especially if we are suffering because we are being effective for God?

And if we go dancing out of our worship center, we carry that with us into life, and bring more joy to the rest of what we do, and that joy can transform others’ lives, as my priest friend shows us. At least, it makes people curious! And it gives us strength to carry on.

Praising God starts the joy, living in God builds the joy, loving others toward God multiplies the joy, especially when the 'get with God' themselves and become disciples. Believe me—I know!

Do you know the joy of Jesus? Got joy? God's joy?

If not, you know what to do!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on April 27, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]