
The Ten Joys

Psalm 23

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 25, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

One of the most frustrating things in a friendship or even a casual acquaintance is when you say something that's meant to be a compliment or offer what's supposed to be a generous gesture but it's taken as an insult or criticism. You say, "You look gorgeous in that photograph," and your friend says, "You mean you don't think I look gorgeous in real life?" You say, "That's just about the finest dinner you've ever cooked, my dear," and your loved one says, "Well that's not saying a whole lot about the others, is it?" You say, "We thought it would be great if you'd like to join us for Thanksgiving," and your friend says, "Are you implying I'm a lonely old misery and you need to take pity on me?" Or perhaps most of all, you say, "You've lost weight!" and almost anyone else on the planet says, "Are you suggesting....?"

I imagine God gets that feeling all the time. The Bible is a love letter from God to us, but we often read it as if it's some kind of a threat. This is the source of the psychological critique of religion, made popular by Sigmund Freud. Freud said that the faith of Moses rests on a God who's always asking more than Israel can give. Hence there's a perpetual cycle of demand and failure and guilt and sacrifice and demand and failure and guilt and sacrifice. If religion were a purely human creation, then Freud might have a point. But the whole point of faith is to say the truth of life is way beyond human imagination or control, let alone creation, and we find joy in being offered glimpses of that truth through the grace of God, who is the face of truth.

God doesn't want to make us guilty. God wants to give us joy. Sure, God gives us the Ten Commandments because God wants to show us ten good ways to live. But at least as important is for us to hear the ten joys God offers us in the Twenty-Third Psalm. The commandments are there to help us find the joys. But the joys are there... the joys are there just because in the end they're what last forever. Listen to the words of the ten joys God offers you in the Twenty-Third Psalm. I'm going to describe all ten.

Number One: "He makes me lie down in green pastures." We start out thinking like a sheep, and a sheep who's used to finding very little to eat. This psalm wasn't written in Vermont or New Hampshire. This is a climate like New Mexico. But God's telling us there's acres of green pasture, and there's so much we can lie *down* in it – we don't even have to eat it all. For a sheep, that's as luxurious as it gets. And if you're not a sheep, just think about what it feels like to lie back in a meadow and stretch wide your arms and legs and breathe in the air and stare deep into the far blue beyond and take in forever. Remember, this is the first joy God is whispering to you: "I want you to have an abundant life. I want you to have plenty. I want you to have enough and to spare."

Number Two: "He leads me beside still waters." If you've ever been for a hike in the mountains, you'll know what this means. You don't take bottled water with you, because the water in the streams is fresher than anything you could get from a bottle factory. But sometimes the fresh water's hard to reach, because it's in a torrential waterfall, and sometimes in a hot season there's not much of it or it collects together in a stagnant pond. The psalm says God takes us to a place where the water's flowing fast enough to be fresh but not so fast we can't drink it. So here's God's joy: "I want you to have fresh, flowing, accessible, *quiet* water. I want you to know what it's like to have cold water flowing down on your tongue and in your mouth and over your cheeks and through your hair and down your neck and everywhere."

Number Three: "He restores my soul." I recall once when I'd been walking in the mountains all day, and I was about an hour from the car, I came upon a wayside café with an enterprising host who sold multicolored cocktails for tired hikers; and I took my boots off and put my feet up and sat and drank one and it was just about the best thing I ever tasted. And in a few minutes all the weariness oozed away and I was happy and contented and replaying the images of the day in my mind's eye and basking in the joy of the evening breeze. That's God's third joy: "You'll get worn out, you'll get worn down, you'll have nothing left, but I will bring you back to life." The feeling of coming back to life is really better than the feeling of not getting tired. Think about seeing an old friend after a long absence and realizing they're the person above all who makes you laugh till

you're hollowed out inside, and in the laughter recognizing "Life is good when I'm with you." God is that person. God whispers, "I want to restore your soul."

Number Four: "He leads me in right paths for his name's sake." There's a man in a Nick Hornby novel who struggles with the practical details of life and finds it especially hard to live alone after his parents have died. One day he goes to see his physician complaining of terrible stomach ache. "What've you been *eating*?" asks the doctor. "Quite a lot of potatoes," says the man. "Have you been *cooking* them?" asks the doctor. The man replies, "I never know which things you need to cook and which things you don't." He's right. Sometimes it's hard to know how to make life work – how to make all the bits fit together and know which bits to cook. God is whispering to you, "I want to help you find the good ways, to navigate the troubled times and walk through the storms."

Number Five: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me." It's clear God's joys are not about a fantasy land of make-believe. We've already acknowledged our human limitations in naming our weariness, and we're about to recognize the sins of others in encountering our enemies. Here we face the reality of our fear of death. And God whispers the most important word in the whole Bible. *With*. That's the word that sums up the Old and New Testaments. God created us because he wanted to be *with*. God called Israel because he wanted to be *with*. God came among us in Jesus because he wanted to be *with*. God comes in our midst in the power of the Holy Spirit because he wants to be *with*. God saves us because he wants to be *with* us forever. "You are *with* me:" it's at the center of this psalm, it's at the center of God's joy, it's at the center of the Bible, it's at the center of our faith. It's at the center of God.

Number Six: "Your rod and your staff – they comfort me." You'll notice in the Dean of Duke Chapel's version of the Hebrew, this verse is translated differently. It says "My *Rodney* and my staff will comfort me." Think about that word "comfort" for a moment. God's first instinct is to be *with* us, but alongside that instinct is an urge to help us make things better. I wonder what comforts you when you're really in trouble. I'll tell you what really comforts me. I think of times of physical pain or profound grief or hurt or shock or disappointment and what a rod and staff means to me is a person who's not afraid, who doesn't change the subject, or run away to do a useful job, or make up stories to pretend it's ok, or say really it's not so bad, or tell me about how something worse or more interesting happened to them. What comforts *me* is someone whose strength says "However bad or painful or miserable this is, it's not going to scare me away – and I'm going to show you that with the words I say to you, with how I touch you, and with the way I'm happy to be silent with you. We're going to stare this tragedy down together." That's what a comforter does. That's what God does.

Number Seven: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies." The realism of God's joy strikes again. There's no pretending that you and I don't have enemies. But think about this. There's no suggestion that my enemies are God's enemies. There's no suggestion, in fact, that God has enemies at all. Think about that for a moment: *God has no enemies*. We do; God doesn't. Is Judas Jesus' enemy? Is Pilate? Is Caiaphas? No. And they were the ones who got Jesus killed. *God has no enemies*. How does God deal with *our* enemies? He sets a table before them and before us. That's what it says. "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies."

For Christians, it's impossible not to see this table as a Eucharistic table, and the food on the table as the body of Christ, the bread of life given to reconcile us to one another by reconciling us to God. That's what God does in heaven: he prepares the tastiest banquet ever known, and the appetizing smells waft down to earth, and there's only thing holding us back from sitting down to eat forever. And that's the fear of who else might be there. I once had a Hungarian professor who complained, "I can't stand it that people in this country invite you to dinner and never tell you who you'll be sitting next to – it could be someone you've just slammed in a book review and it can be so embarrassing." That's what God does. God invites you to dinner but never tells you who you'll be sitting next to. It's so embarrassing. It's what makes God laugh.

Number Eight: "You anoint my head with oil." Again, when you think of enemies and the shadow of death, a Christian can't help but think of the woman extravagantly anointing Jesus' head with oil and triggering Judas' betrayal of Jesus. Maybe this is where she got the idea. She realized this is how God shows he adores us. It's hard to think of many things more sensual than a scalp massage with body lotions. Have you ever contemplated what it might be to receive a massage from God? This is one of the most physical and exotic verses in the whole

Bible. God really wants us to feel the sensual joy of being cherished and adored, of feeling his hands through our hair and the smoothness and assurance of his touch on our head and skin. This is what God has in store for us. Are you ready to enjoy being enjoyed by God?

Number Nine: “My cup overflows.” Something tells me this particular cup doesn’t contain water. Yet again, for Christians, the idea of a cup makes us think of the Last Supper and of the cup of suffering that Jesus contemplates in the Garden of Gethsemane. But when you add the word “overflows,” you’re straight back to the wedding at Cana and the superabundance of wine. God’s promise to us is that in him we’ll have way too much, not just of the regular things like grass and bread, but of the wonderful, luxurious things like wine. This is a fully-fledged banquet, with flowing drinks for the guests and plenty of additional pleasures like a joyous massage from the host. This is some party.

And finally, most mysterious and wondrous of all, Number Ten: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” I imagine everyone here knows what it means to go on an Easter Egg hunt. You spend a very rapid five minutes rapidly hunting down egg-shaped candy and chocolate and somehow make a connection to Christ’s rising from the dead. It’s every child’s dream moment of the year. But just imagine for a moment. What if the hunting went the other way around? What if the eggs hunted *you*? What if everywhere you went, on every window-ledge and stairwell and door-handle, there was a fabulous piece of candy or chocolate? What if you were being *stalked by joy*?

The psalm doesn’t say “Surely I shall search for goodness and mercy;” it says “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow *me* – shall pursue me, chase me, hunt me down, stalk me, search me out, track me down, find me” – and not just for a *while*, but “*all the days of my life*.” That’s the greatest promise of all: it’s not that goodness and mercy are hard to find and you’ll spend your whole life looking for them – it’s that they’re on a perpetual mission to find you and they’ll be *pursuing you every day of your life*. You can’t finally escape God’s relentless tenderness, try as you might.

Do me a favor. Ask yourself what version of religion you’re showing to your family, your friends, your neighbors, colleagues, clients, and the world in general. Are they seeing a religion of commandments, of discipline, guilt, and shame? Or are they seeing the joy? There’s a place for the commandments. They’re for guiding you to the joy. But the world needs to see the joy. The world needs to see the joy in you. Does everyone who encounters you soon realize that God is fundamentally about joy? Read Psalm 23 to yourself, today, tomorrow, every day. These are the promises God makes to you. These are the resurrection fruits God offers you. These are the joys God wants for you.

And what response does God want *from* you? Believe them. Share them. Enjoy them.