

Text: Numbers 11:1-6, 18-23, 31-34
Target audience: All
Topic: joy
Theme: Absence of Joy
My purpose for this message: Where do you fall on the joy index?
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Land of the Free, Home the Miserable

PRAY.

Find Gal.5:22. Years ago I read this in a Bible study on the fruit of the Spirit: READ vv.22-24. I got stuck—convicted I guess—at joy. It dawned on me for the first time that something that should be growing in every Christian’s life never really seemed to be in season in me. Worry, anxiety, too much introspection, self-pity, depression, fear of people, and other unsavory tendencies shouted joy down. I’d read Galatians 5 dozens of times but this one time, God kept dragging me back to the text, shoving my nose in v.22 and asking, “What about joy?”

In this nation the Declaration of Independence says we have the right to “the pursuit of happiness.” (I’m going to use joy and happiness interchangeably.) Yet some Americans think that 230 years later happiness is more elusive than ever.

In his book *The Progress Paradox: How Life Gets Better While People Feel Worse*, Gregg Easterbrook says most Americans live better than 99.4 percent of all the human beings who have ever lived. Life expectancy has nearly doubled in the past century; real per-capita income has doubled since 1960. In fact, we have even *more* income than that since food prices and the price of many durable goods keeps dropping.

Our standard of living is second to none. Following World War II the average new American home was 1,100 square feet; today it’s 2,300. Take health care, leisure, or technology—most of us enjoy a quality of life beyond the wildest dreams of someone 5 decades ago.

Yet we’re miserable. And more and more people who *are*, can’t say exactly why. We’ve got more of everything except happiness. No larger percentage of *today’s* American says they’re happy, than did 50 years ago. Those who say they’re *very happy*, are *fewer* than 50 years ago and figures are dropping. 1 in 4 struggle with depression and it’s estimated 7 % of all Americans suffer at least one incidence of major, debilitating depression each year. We are the land of the free, the home of the miserable.

We’re going to talk about joy for the next few weeks, and to begin today, let’s do a little self-analysis. Let’s invent an index that measures how happy we are: the JOY INDEX. No one’s perfectly happy, or perfectly miserable, but toward which side of the index do you lean? Are you essentially a happy Christian, or have you adopted misery as a lifestyle?

Let’s turn to this mirror we call the Bible and see if we see *ourselves* in it. Do you have a normal unhappiness, or an abnormal happiness?

1. A Normal Unhappiness

FIND Numbers 11. If there was ever a group of unhappy, joyless people, it was the nation that descended from Abraham. And they were the *worst* the early years after God freed them.

2 million Israelites had marched down the road fleeing Egypt and slavery: “We’re free, we’re free!” God had performed showstopping wonders that finally forced Pharaoh’s hand. And then when the people were pinched between a sea and an avenging army, God had parted the waters for them, and then drowned their pursuers. You’d think that kind of miraculous history would encourage people to trust. Yet in 3 short days, the Israelites began to gripe about no water (Ex.15). So God gave them water. In Ex.16, they complained there was

no food. So God gave them food. In Ex. 17 again they complained there was no water. Again, God gave them water.

Now here in Numbers, it's rerun time. Their last march rescued them from their prison home, now 11 months later they begin a new march that will take them to their *new* home: Canaan. 3 days *into* it, the griping has started. And God had had enough. READ 1-3. Depending how you use the one Hebrew word in verse 1, instead of reading that they complained about their hardships, it may read similar to how the NKJV puts it: *...when the people complained, it displeased the Lord*. Or, it was an offense against the Lord.

And this time instead of meeting their longings with warmth, he met them with heat: fire blazed along the outskirts of the camp, consuming some tents and those living there. Every parent here knows what a child's grumbling is like, and despises it.

- The older child: "You never left *me* do that!"
- The negative kid at Christmas: "I never get anything I want!"
- The X-box kid standing beside the lawnmower in disbelief: "None of my friend's parents make them do chores!"
- Or the kid standing in the middle of ground zero that used to be his room: "I *did* clean it up!"

Right parents; you have any children like this? And no, you can't have any fire for your fingers! Moses interceded for the people and the fire died down.

But not the grumbling. Among the people were folks referred as "rabble," either foreigners who slipped out of Egypt with them, or Jewish troublemakers. Complaints about nothing to eat but manna began with them and spread like a plague to the rest. READ 5-6. "Want meat with our manna." Apparently, so bad they *cried* about it; somebody in every household (4, 10a). And God didn't like it (10b). READ 18-20, 31-34.

Grumbling is like any other speech: it's an x-ray of the heart. Jesus said (Lk.6:45) that what we say is the "overflow of the heart." Our words reveal our attitudes, convictions, and desires. These folks were not joy-filled, they were not happy. And grumbling is that verbal overflow of the heart's simmering unhappiness.

So, if you doing the diagnosis, grumbling may tell you a lot about where you fall in the joy index.

2. An Abnormal Happiness

The world calls happiness normal if you just had a baby, were left off with a warning instead of a ticket, are in love, finished a race in record time, or got a promotion. People expect you to be happy; it's normal.

But..., what if you're baby had a birth defect? What if in running that stoplight you killed someone? Or your husband started being gone 'til 2 in the morning without an explanation? *Then*, "If you're happy, you're crazy" or so the thinking would go.

Abnormal happiness. The happy side of the joy index doesn't just measure happiness where there should be happiness, but happiness where they're *shouldn't* be. READ Jas.1:2-4.

You expect a woman to be happy on her wedding day, but not on the day she buries her husband. You expect a man to be elated when he passes his oral exams for his master's, but not when he flunks out of grad school.

And yet being happy when it's "abnormal" is normal according to the Bible. Because what makes us miserable or happy is something other than what makes our neighbors and friends miserable or happy. They are ruled by the events themselves. God says that while the events may not be all that appealing, how He uses them for our good, *is*.

Acts 5:41 reads that after the apostles were flogged, they rejoiced (not at the flogging *itself*, but at the *privilege* it represented: to suffer on behalf of the name of Jesus).

2 Cor.7:4 says that in the middle of all his troubles, Paul's joy was boundless. If you tend toward the misery side of the index, you're probably fuming right now. "That's just not realistic Keith. This sounds like platitudes, like simplistic answers." As of yet, I haven't really tried to give you any answers; next week.

And understand that joy is not just painting a smile on your face. It's not denying your normal emotional responses to bad circumstances. Jesus knew he was going to raise Lazarus from the dead, but he still cried, seeing the sadness on the faces of the man's sisters.

But joy is river of life that flows beneath all of life's good and bad, bringing a constant renewal of hope and happiness.

Concl:

Where are you on the JOY INDEX? +10, -10, somewhere in between? You know, when I first realized what was missing on my fruit tree, I resolved to be a more upbeat person. Nice try, but that became little more than positive thinking. What needed to change? More than just my attitude. I wanted more than just *Keith's* fruit, I wanted God's. The fruit of the *Holy Spirit* is love, joy... Next week I'll discuss what began to change, and the following week, discuss the result.

John Piper wrote a book that has been very infectious in my thinking about joy and happiness: *Desiring God, Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*. In it he quotes the 17th century Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal.

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend to this end. The cause of some going to war, and of others avoiding it, is the same desire in both, attended with different views. The will never takes the least step but to this object. This is the motive of every action of every man, even of those who hang themselves.

There once was in man a true happiness of which now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present. But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself.