

THE POWER OF FELLOWSHIP

Part 2 - You Bring Me Joy

PSALM 16:1-3 (ESV)



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HOLY JOY

Last week, we opened this series talking about the gift of the fellowship of Christians living and investing in each other's lives as a kindness from God. We were made for fellowship. We talked of fellowship as something both vital to wellness and hindered by obstacles. Some of you even helped name a few for us—a lack

of margin in our lives for relationships, doubt that we really need each other, the challenges we face in the investments of time and the exposures of ourselves true friendship demands.

Last week we named some *real* barriers to meaningful fellowship. There is power in naming—articulating a vantage point we can recognize and interact with together. This is happening too. I've heard more comments on last week's sermon than any other in our recent past, and the majority of those comments were on how helpful it was to hear how others articulated challenges we all experience, but perhaps struggle to put words to. Today we are going to do some more naming, but our focus here is not so much on naming the obstacles we find to fellowship, but more on the joy we find in it. Why does fellowship bring us joy?

Let me portray something I bet all of us have experienced. You're coming in to church, the service hasn't started yet but you're settling into your little "spot," the place you always sit. You like your spot. You like how some folks always seem to want to sit close to you. They could sit anywhere, but they always choose a spot by your spot. Then you see someone across the room and the very sight of them stirs an excitement in you. Its almost involuntary, a warming that comes upon you just at the presence of that person or family. You can't narrow down the cause of your happiness to one particular thing or another. You just delight to see them. "Oh man! I love that guy!"

Try it. Look around. What do you think? When we experience joy in seeing a friend, is that a disposable moment? Should we respond, "I need to table my joy in seeing my friend until after the service. Its time for worship." What if God's word tells you not to table that joy but to bring it into your worship, adding friendship to your list of things to praise God for? What if that instant of joy is not a disposable moment, but a holy one? What if you are involuntarily responding just as God means for you to? Today we want to move from involuntary joy at the sight of friends to intentional, Godward delight over the indispensable roles our brothers and sisters in Christ are meant to have in our lives. To get there, we turn to the words of King David.

PSALM 16:1-3

¹Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, 'You are my Lord;
²I have no good apart from you.'
³As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight."

THE EXCELLENT ONES

Our text is a Psalm about God. Its author, King David, grew up tending sheep—a job which resonated in his heart as an excellent analogy for God's care. The analogy remains strongly fitting. Another Psalm, Psalm 23, might be the most read portion of the Old Testament across the globe and down through time. What is it about? It is David's analogy of God as his Shepherd.

The first two verses of today's text conjure this same image. Like a sheep, David writes from the perspective of one who needs protection and cannot provide it for himself. The Lord is his refuge, he says—like a shepherd is the preserving refuge of his flock. In David's words we see something striking and true. The refuge the Shepherd gives isn't so much a physical shelter as it is a strength of person and the intentionality of His care. So long as the Shepherd is near, the sheep shall be preserved.

But how is the Shepherd Himself a refuge that preserves the life of His flock? By relying on brute strength alone? When David wanted to fight Goliath, he told King Saul of his days as a shepherd; "when a lion or bear came and took a lamb from my flock I went after him, struck him and delivered it out of his mouth. And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him." (1 Sam 17:35-36) But does this mean David never thought about how to avoid lions? Would anyone consider that good shepherding? A good shepherd knows a big part of providing refuge comes by avoiding lions in the first place.

God leads us to good things—into green pastures, beside quite waters. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear evil because our Shepherd knows what we need. It has been on His mind longer than we can imagine. David knows his welfare is wrapped up in God's ongoing, wise care—the two are never separated. (v²) Everything good comes from God.

And what does God, by His wisdom, give for the ongoing refuge and delight of his people? One thing, the topic of this series, is God gives those David refers to in verse 3 as "the saints in the land." Who are they? This is a reference to the people of Israel. The word saints (or *holy ones*) in the Bible is often used to convey sinlessness, but in some places (like here) it carries another meaning of being set apart unto God. David's people are *holy* in that they have been consecrated unto the Lord.

Of course, many in Israel were far from living up to their designation as "saints," often rejecting the Lord in the ways they lived. But many also embraced their call to follow after God—and these people, to David, were "the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight." David was drawn to men of Godly, loyal character—men committed to sincere and humble obedience to God, and when he saw them, with joy he thought, "Oh man, I love that guy." If your heart's desire is to be a Christian in more than name only, God means to use you as well to be counted among the excellent ones in whom is someone else's delight.

So this brings us to the question of the hour: If the preserving refuge of God includes the fellowship of the saints, and if that fellowship is meant to bring us delight, what specifically is it about fellowship with God's people that brings us this joy?

THE JOY OF SEEING GOD

Perhaps the greatest joy of fellowship is seeing God reflected in our friends. Jesus tells us, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Mt 5:16) When we reflect the kindness and wisdom of God, God isn't fretting that we might be mistaken for Him and get the glory that is rightfully His. If your heart before God is to reflect Him, you will draw attention to the One you serve.

The Refuge: Many of you have done this for my family over the years—you've helped with a home repair or watched our kids or brought over a meal when we were dealing with fevers, and I can tell you we saw God's love for us reflected in your love for us—and it has always brought us joy. One refuge God builds through service is He uses your lives as living illustrations of eternal truths. When you visit the sick, the sick catch a glimpse of the compassion of the Lord. When you feed the hungry, the hungry see God's provision in you. When you confront your brother caught in sin, he often cannot help but see you as sent by God—regardless of how he responds. The power of fellowship is that God uses our relationships with each other to reveal real, sustaining, convicting, liberating truths about Himself.

THE JOY OF DISCOVERY

Fellowship as a process of discovery can be a great joy. Two key kinds of discovery come to mind as forms of refuge and joy.

- **DISCOVERING PEOPLE:** No one has a simple story, and while we all have burdens and hardship in our lives, we also have qualities that are a joy to discover. I was just telling a friend that one of the things I love about him is how everything interests him. A discovery like that leads to infinite possibilities of other discoveries during our friendship. I know we'll never get bored or run out of things to talk about. Life, to him, is an adventure and that makes being his friend fun.

Our culture says we should decide who to be friends with before we get to know them. We go off first impressions, lifestyle and other superficial things to decide if a friendship is worth pursuing. That isn't how biblical friendship is meant to work. We're to love everyone and enjoy discovering each other over time. What a joy it is to love someone, knowing you're only at the start of what may be a lifelong friendship.

The Refuge: These sorts of friendships keep us from circling the drain—which is to say, they keep us from becoming so focused on ourselves that we only see from only one vantage point—our own. When we see through our own eyes alone, we'll believe all kinds of lies. The Godly friendships we pursue are meant to keep us moving deeper forward into better relational, spiritual, emotional and often even physical health. You can never exhaust an honest friendship, and that is a joy.

- **DISCOVERING TRUTH DEFERRED:** (I'm borrowing this concept from John Piper.) Sometimes when we gather for community group, someone will share a verse or thought, but for whatever reason in that moment it has no impact on me. But later, something will happen and all of the sudden their words will come back like a rush and help me. It's like I am carrying their words with me when I leave—truth deferred.

The Refuge: At times we all feel unmovable, depressed or weary. Its dangerous because we're so open to temptation. In the refuge of fellowship, we hear other people's victories and struggles. They tell us where God has met them, and often those words warm our cold hearts, revealing something we'd been missing on our own. Our words to one another can be as spiritually life-giving as a meal to a starving man. In the moment we may not feel their nourishment, but often later they will explode with meaning, to our great joy. It is never an accident when this happens. As Paul told the Thessalonians; "encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all," (1 Thes 5:14) God means for us to function in this way.

THE JOY OF BRINGING JOY

Lastly, if seeing God reflected in others is meant to bring us joy, then we have to humbly accept that another joy of fellowship is the joy of being used by God to bring joy to others. I met a man this week who told me that one particular sermon of mine has been a great help to him. He said he listens to it about twice a month. That was humbling. But at the risk of sounding proud, I must tell you it also brought me great joy. And I believe it should have. My charge is to preach the Word of God, and my prayer is that the Lord would work through His Word proclaimed. So when I hear of God doing this, it brings me joy.

The Refuge: That God means to use His people to reveal Himself and convey His truth means we have a holy purpose in this world. The kinds of friends we might want to be apart from Christ would be likeable ones. But the kinds of friends Christ calls us to be are eternally useful ones. That is an honor that is meant to draw greater things from us than we would have otherwise offered this world—greatness He supplies. We are free to abandon a life of defending our own image so we can embrace a life of magnifying God's image, knowing His work through us will bring joy to others—which brings joy to us.

A STATEMENT ABOUT GOD

When God surveys the land His people walk with all its predators and snares, He knows a big part of our preservation is found in His preparation. What has He equipped His people with so that when the predators seek to pounce or temptation sets its snare, we are preserved? One refuge we see from the first page of Scripture to the last is the protection we find in the fellowship of the saints. "It is not good for man to be alone." (Gen 2:18) "Behold, how good it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (Ps 133:1)

I am thankful today that the role the people of God play in my life extends beyond correction. I am thankful for the joy you bring—the ways you love to have fun, the ways you model Godward joy in the midst of trials, the way you leave a lingering impression of something true in my mind that so often comes into focus only later. And I'm thankful for the times you've told me that I have, by God's grace, shown you something more of the depth, height and wonder of God's love for His people.

I want to close by telling you something true that may sound strange at first, but it is still biblical. I want you to hear it and even more I want you to own it. I also want you to know that I say it as only one voice among many here today who would echo the same thing. I want you to know that I say it with joy and I want you to receive it with joy and with conviction. And lastly, I want you to know that what I'm about to say is more a statement about God than anything else. Here it is. Here is what I want to say: You bring me joy. You are the excellent ones.