

The Theology of Joy

Living with Faith, Joy and Gratitude

I consider it as a great privilege to start this inspirational conference with a reflection on the **Theology of Joy**.

What is Joy?

Let us begin by asking the question: What is Joy? After all that is the theme of this conference. **Give Room for JOY**. In other words, **Let the Joy Grow** – obviously in three dimensions: **towards God, within us and towards others**.

Do we all have the same answer to this question: **What is Joy?**

Is it an idea, emotion, virtue, philosophy, ideal, or something else?

There is no commonly agreed definition for it, yet still everyone seems to be selling happiness these days - **drug dealers, pharmaceutical companies, Hollywood, Disney, toy companies, and of course happiness-pedaling gurus**.

As a quick survey I asked few of my friends this question: **What is Joy?**

I got different answers – some very tangible and some not so tangible.

A **Hindu friend** defined Joy as something we can sense through our five senses: sight (a beautiful flower), hearing (a melodious music), taste (a Danish pastry), smell (a special perfume), and feeling (a feather touch).

He further added that **Joy can be acquired** or achieved through our spiritual discipline or efforts - citing **YOGA** as an example. In other words, he sees Joy as both **sensual and spiritual**.

Sri Krishna in a certain discourse in Bhagavad Gita says: Notions of heat and cold, pain and pleasure, are born only of the contact of the senses with their objects. They have a beginning and an end. They are not permanent in their nature. Bear them patiently. **(Bhagavad Gita 2.14)**

Sri Krishna further says: A person who is the same in pain and pleasure, whom these cannot disturb, he alone is able to attain immortality. **(Bhagavad Gita 2.15)**

A Muslim friend said this: Perfect happiness will only be available to us if we spend life everlasting in Paradise. It is only there that we will find total peace, tranquillity and security. It is only there that we will be free of the fear, anxiety and pain that are part of the human condition. However the guidelines provided by Islam allow us, imperfect humans, to seek happiness in this world. The key to being happy in this world and the next is seeking the pleasure of God, and worshipping Him.

A young agnostic friend told me this:

- If you want happiness for an hour — take a nap.
- If you want happiness for a day — go fishing.
- If you want happiness for a year — inherit a fortune.
- If you want happiness for a lifetime — help someone else.

A scholar- friend pointed out: In the fifth century, Boethius – a Roman Senator and philosopher - could claim that "**God is happiness itself**". But by the middle of the 19th century, the formula was reversed to read "**Happiness is God.**" Earthly happiness emerged as the idol of idols, the central meaning in modern life, the source of human aspiration, the purpose of existence. Materialism relocated God to the shopping mall.

A Christian friend replied: I find Joy in Jesus.

What do we make out of these responses? I felt that part of one's joy could be lost if one gets too much into the realms of philosophy or psychology or theology of Joy. I liked that one-line response of my Christian friend: **I find Joy in Jesus.** This was one such moment when I profoundly thanked God for revealing true wisdom to ordinary folks.

However, judging from the variety of answers I received, I felt the need to establish certain contours of understanding, if at all possible, about **what is Joy** - before we go forward.

Further, my survey-outcome highlighted the need for Christians to be pretty clear of what they mean by Joy – based on what the Bible says. This is very important in a multi-religious society – to be clear of what one believes – amidst the cacophony of several philosophies, ideologies, ideas and alternative spiritual movements.

Webster's dictionary defines Joy as "**a condition or feeling of high pleasure or delight; happiness or gladness.**"

Other definitions which I came across include:

- Joy is an emotion so deep and so lasting.
- Joy is a source or cause of keen pleasure or delight.
- Joy is an expression or display of glad feelings or festive gaiety.
- Joy is a state of extreme happiness.

Is JOY different from HAPPINESS?

Naturally a question then springs up in our mind: **Is JOY different from HAPPINESS** - two words we often use interchangeably?

The answer is: Yes and No.

Joy is something that lasts. Happiness is something that is temporary.

Joy springs from within and is an internal experience. Happiness is caused by external circumstances or experiences.

Joy brings with it a feeling of **contentment and confidence** which can take us through a storm in our life-journey. Happiness is not present when we are in the midst of a storm; it just vanishes.

Happiness is a blurred emotion. It can mean different things to many people.

Joy is a conscious commitment to be happy, to have a sense of gratitude and contentment despite life's challenges.

How does having a Positive Mental Attitude (PMA), pushed by today's motivational speakers, fit into real joy? Too many people try this kind of pop psychology with no foundation under it. It comes across as forced and artificial. A few leading televangelists preaching prosperity gospel come to my mind. To me, they all seem to project Joy as buyable/sellable commodity.

Somebody once said that **Joy is happiness with a much longer shelf life**. But Joy is even more than that.

Bible and Joy

Let us now turn to the Bible and see: **What the Bible says about JOY.**

A search for the word JOY came up with 155 verses in King James Version. Another source reported that the word JOY appears 88 times in the Old Testament in 22 books; 57 times in the New Testament in 18 books.

Certainly there is a lot of JOY in the Bible!

There are 15 different Hebrew words and 8 Greek words to describe JOY - both as a noun and as a verb. This shows that Joy constitutes something that is tangible or concrete as well as intangible or abstract.

In Hebrew - the original language of the Old Testament - several words for Joy, each with different shades of meaning, appear. Similar is the case in Greek – the original language of the New Testament.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the words translated as "Joy" mean much the same as the English word: **gladness, cheerfulness, calm delight.**

In the Old Testament Joy refers to a wide range of **human experiences**—from erotic love ([Song of Solomon 1:4](#)), to marriage ([Proverbs 5:18](#)), birth of children ([Psalm 113:9](#)), gathering of the harvest, military victory ([Isaiah 9:3](#)), and drinking wine ([Psalm 104:15](#)).

The Psalms express the joyous mood of believers as they encounter God. ([Psalm 32:11](#) “**Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice, O righteous, and shout for joy, all you upright in heart.**”). Joy is a response to God's word ([Psalm 119:14](#) “**In the way of thy testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.**”)

In fact, Joy characterizes Israel's corporate worship life ([Deuteronomy](#); [2 Chronicles 30:21a](#): “**And the people of Israel that were present at Jerusalem kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with great gladness.**”). How joyous our corporate worship is?

Basic to the Old Testament understanding of Joy are God's Acts in history. Two such Acts are: Israel's deliverance from Egypt ([Exodus 18:9-11](#)) and Israel's return from the Babylonian exile ([Jeremiah 31:1-19](#)) to Jerusalem.

In the Old Testament **spiritual joys are expressed by the metaphors** of feasting, marriage, victory in military endeavors, and successful financial undertakings. For example, the joy of the harvest is used to describe the believer's final victory over his adversaries ([Psalm 126:5-6](#)

“May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of **Joy!** He that goes forth weeping bearing the seed for sowing shall come home with shouts of **Joy** bringing his sheaves with him.”)

We can hear the echoes of such **metaphors in the Danish Hymns** contained in Den Danske Salme Bog.

In the New Testament Jesus himself joins the Joy of mundane events of daily life – for example the marriage at Cana. Do we picture a happy, laughing Jesus in our thoughts or reflections?

Joy is associated with the nativity scene of the angels’ song (Luke 2:10 “For behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people”). The Magi, upon finding the infant Jesus, are **overjoyed** (Matthew 2:10). The birth of John the Baptist as the forerunner of the Messiah is an occasion of joy for his father and others (Luke 1:14 “And you will have joy and gladness.”). Luke's Gospel-narration is concluded with the disciples returning with great Joy from Bethany after Jesus' ascension. (Luke 24:52 “And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy.”)

Heaven and Angels too rejoice in the New Testament **at an unbeliever's conversion**. Luke places three parables together in which God, in two instances with the angels, rejoices at the redemption - upon finding the lost sheep, the shepherd rejoices (Luke 15:3-7); the woman rejoices upon finding the lost coin (Luke 15:8-10) . The prodigal son's return brings rejoicing (Luke 15:11-32).

Interestingly there is a subtle change in the usage of the word Joy from Acts 13 onwards. **It gets tied with trials, suffering, persecution and the like**. Why?

I believe that a change had begun to take place in the church about this time. The first 20 years had passed, and now the apostles were dealing with a more mature body of believers – struggling with the application of Gospel teachings. The believers had started facing stark opposition and challenges – theological, political, economic and what not!

But for these believers, **trials and persecution are occasions for Joy** (James 1:2 “Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials.”). Suffering brings Joy as believers are united with Christ in his suffering (1 Peter 4:13-14) Paul speaks of his Joy in the midst of affliction (2 Corinthians 7:4-16 “With all our affliction, I am overjoyed.”)

Joy becomes part of the faith (Philippians 1:25). God's kingdom is described as: **righteousness, peace and Joy (Romans 14:17).**

Certainty of salvation is a cause for Joy, as the disciples are commanded to "rejoice that your names are written in heaven" (Luke 10:20).

Surely the meaning of Joy takes in new dimensions and shades.

Also, about this time, Apostle Paul emerges as the dominant figure. Paul mentions Joy as the second fruit of the **Holy Spirit** in his letter to the Galatians, along with eight other fruits. Galatians 5:22: ("But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.") Joy is not something to be pursued; it is rather a result of the Christian life - a product.

The church was coming increasingly under fire, and Christians were struggling to grow. We can suppose that Paul began to see and teach Joy in a different light – Joy as a character trait - tempered by fire!

Christian Joy often comes tied with challenges and trials. What we have been witnessing in the Middle East and in some other parts of the world in recent times is a stark reminder to this fact. How do those brothers and sisters continue to sing and worship the Lord without losing their Faith and Joy? It clearly shows that Joy in Christian theology is different from superficial, external happiness.

Let me narrate a particular case - where the involved persons have literally challenged my own concept of Joy through their life-example.

Peter says: "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But **rejoice** in so far as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also **rejoice and be glad** when his glory is revealed." (I Peter 4:12-13)

Count your trials as **joy**. James 1:2-3 says, "Knowing that the testing of your faith [through trials] produces patience." God's testing process has the goal or aim of purging us of all impurity, to make us "perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (verse 4).

The word Gospel literally means good news. Jesus encouraged us to think of the future as a time of Joy, so that it sustains us now when times are difficult.

I see three categories or groups of people gathered here today: those who are natural citizens of Denmark - born and brought up here; those who came to Denmark of their own choice; and those who came here due to circumstances beyond their control. All of us however enjoy the Joy of Christ because of this particular theology: **Trials and tribulations are integral part of Christian life! It is part of our Faith. It is part of our DNA.**

Christian joy is not the seeking of pleasure: quite the opposite. It is a curious paradox of life that the more we seek to be happy the more miserable we become. A famous writer (Eric Hoffer) once said: "The search for happiness is one of the chief sources of unhappiness."

Joy is God's gift. It is not something to be pursued.

As mentioned earlier, Jesus said to his followers: "Rejoice that your names are written in heaven." (Luke 10:20)

Joy is about getting this into perspective, not how wide our grin is! The Christian has the promise of Jesus that the best is yet to come. We can be joyful in spite of circumstances.

As we read the Bible, we will find this theme again and again. **Christian Joy exists in spite of circumstances.** Christians should be able to display their inner JOY at all three Houses of Worship: Church, Home and Work-Station.

Let us encourage each other to be truly Joyful – driven by our **Faith, Hope, Love, Contentment and Gratitude** – in spite of circumstances. The five pillars of Joy!

We are familiar with the first three pillars coming from what Apostle Paul wrote in [1 Corinthians 13:13](#), "So **faith, hope and love** abide."

Regarding the fourth pillar **contentment**, not everyone is truly **content** with his or her life. Often we are unsatisfied and seek more for what we don't have and who we are. Through scripture however, we are commanded to be content with all we have in life.

As we practice the discipline of **gratitude** instead of complaining, grumbling, or forgetting God's goodness, we will experience His peace, be filled with His joy, and grow in faith and hope.

All these five pillars - **Faith, Hope, Love, Contentment and Gratitude** – are borne out of God's grace, and even though we don't deserve. They are the five gifts of grace.

I would encourage you to look at JOY as a fruit - made up of five tastes or colors: **Faith, Hope, Love, Contentment and Gratitude**

Let me now read out two scripture portions for you – one from the OT and the other from the NT – as part of this inspirational talk.

Habakkuk 3:17-19. (Explain background.) “Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign LORD is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, he enables me to go on the heights.”

Here is what St. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6:4 -10 (Explain background). “Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, **yet always rejoicing**; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything”.

Do these two scripture-portions resonate in any manner with our own life-journeys? If yes, REJOICE. Because in these two verses I see the gist of Christian Theology of Joy – a theology that encompasses Faith, Hope, Love, Gratitude and Contentment.

When we have the Joy of the Lord, we will know it and so will others. In addition to being joyful, we should let others have their Joy. Christian Joy is contagious. Do we see some role-models - at our homes, communities, cities and villages? My wife and I have met quite a few JOYFUL Christians here in Denmark. They have truly inspired us.

Where Joy cannot be found?

Men have pursued joy in every avenue imaginable. Some have successfully found it while others have not. Perhaps it would be easier to describe where joy cannot be found:

Not in Unbelief -- Voltaire was a non-believer of the most pronounced type. He wrote: "I wish I had never been born."

Not in Pleasure -- Lord Byron lived a life of pleasure if anyone did. He wrote: "The worm, the canker, and grief are mine alone."

Not in Money -- Jay Gould, the American millionaire, had plenty of that. When dying, he said: "I suppose I am the most miserable man on earth."

Not in Position and Fame -- Lord Beaconsfield enjoyed more than his share of both. He wrote: "Youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret."

Not in Military Glory -- Alexander the Great conquered the known world in his day. Having done so, he wept in his tent, before he said, "There are no more worlds to conquer."

Where then is real joy found? **The answer is simple - in Christ alone.**

Closing

Let me now summarize the core of my talk tonight in **five bullet points**:

First, **our Joy should be three-dimensional.**

Second, **our Joy should be resting on five grace-filled pillars: Faith, Hope, Love, Contentment and Gratitude.**

Third, **our Joy should grow in spite of circumstances.**

Fourth, **there is lot of Joy in the Bible.**

Fifth, **our Joy is complete only in Christ.**

Let us emerge as candles of Joy for all seasons - at our homes, churches and work-stations.
Let our Joy Grow!

Let me close with a one-line prayer.

Lord, let me be a pencil to add JOY to the life of somebody or at least let me be an eraser to remove somebody's sadness. Amen