



DUDLEY'S MONTHLY MESSAGE

JOHN 15

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Return To Joy

The whole human race is caught up in a frantic search for peace, harmony, purpose, and pleasure. In other words: joy. What most have not yet discovered, however, is that God designed us for that very thing. Even the wiring of the human brain is controlled by a center that is motivated by joy.

We are designed to receive pleasure from the dopamine that saturates the cells of our brains when joy (or a joy-like substitute) is experienced, lighting up the center of our very being and creating neural pathways that teach us to seek that pleasure again. The struggle of humanity is that sin has so distorted us that we try to find that state of joy by a means other than being vitally connected to God himself.

At the very beginning in the garden, the serpent's offer was a life of independence—a promise of needing

nothing outside ourselves. He lied and said that by having enough knowledge, we wouldn't need a connection with God and would therefore be free. It is an illusion that we can know enough to live independently of God, who is the source of wisdom and truth. Strangely, the arrogant mind entertains the conclusion that the more we know, the more independent of God we are. We don't really need God as a crutch for our primitive understanding when we evolve to full self-actualization. We can determine what is right and good on our own.

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It was as foolish then as it is now. Jim Wilder in his book, *The Pandora Problem*, points out that for a thing to be cosmically right, it must consider what is right for all people of all time, not just me in my situation. He concludes, "Humility is in order when dealing with more people than we can know, in a universe much bigger than we can grasp, over a history much longer than we can track." A saner perspective is gratitude that God, who knows everything and can harmonize everything, has granted us the privilege of sharing his life. Our journey into greater knowledge is a discovery of the depths of God's grace. All truth is his truth, and his truth is liberating—even from self-justification. No wonder the forces of hell are against that.

Simply knowing good and evil will not release the joy designed for us. That joy can only be accessed by knowing the living God in such a way that we share his own life. Like a baby who instinctively knows his mother and knows that his mother delights to be with him, we can know the Father and connect with him heart to heart long before we learn how to define our

doctrines about him. Hell's plan has always been to alienate humans from the God who created them and loves being with them, so that they will be preoccupied with trying to secure adequate affirmation and affection from other sources.

With a sense of being disconnected, we fantasize about his true nature and speculate as to what he wants us to do to be accepted. We might speculate that he wants his enemies eliminated, so we project a God of war who kills all but his own people. We might speculate that he wants appeasement, so we sacrifice our best—even our children—to thwart his wrath. We might speculate that God is the big negotiator in the sky wanting to make a deal, so we try to give him what he asks in order to earn his favor. None of these are accurate portrayals of God.

God is love. He demonstrates that love by coming to be with us. Like a mother with her baby, he connects with us and feeds us with the nutrients of life. We are loved and enjoyed before we learn to behave in any certain way. As he loves us, we rejoice in his loving

to be with us and discover that he has been making the first move all along. He created without any pressure from the outside. He went to Noah when the whole world was wicked. He found Abram and founded a nation. He went to Egypt to lead them out. He lived in tents while his people journeyed in the desert—just to be with them. He lived in the temple to be near them.

When Jesus was about to leave through death and resurrection, he comforted the disciples by telling them that he would not leave them as orphans but would send the Spirit to be with them and make his life real to them.

Then he came as a human himself to finally declare in the most outrageously extravagant way how much he wants to be with us.

In his discourse with the disciples, he discloses the intimacy he desires and makes possible for us.

“I am the true vine . . . you are the branches . . . abide in me as I abide in the Father.”

(John 15:1–11 ESV)

In this discourse, he explains how connectedness, love, obedience, and fruit relate properly. Essentially, he explains that staying steadfastly in the Father's love is the key to loving others and that loving others is the key to staying in the Father's love. All true obedience comes from love or it is simply worthless religion. It is the Father's great pleasure that we access our connectedness by praying and receiving his answers. This glorifies the Father. It also fits our mandate to be God's partners on earth, implementing his kingdom by the power of transforming love. In fact, his love empowers us to love our enemies, and that is something that no other religion can accomplish. All this sharing of life results in living in joy. His whole purpose is that his joy might be in us and that our joy might be full.

We are designed for joy. We weren't made to live independently from God. Our brains are designed to be activated

by the joy center. The highest level of joy possible is knowing that God enjoys being with us. As we know that, we will want to be with him. As we are with him, we begin to express his life through our own faculties, and the glory of the Lord is revealed to those around us.

It is time to return to joy. We were made for it. Sin and alienation distorted it. We do not need to depend on joy-substitutes to get the dopamine-high. We can abide in him who has an abundance of joy. It is not nearly as fickle as you might think. Our joy is dependent on his love, and it is secure. Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Nothing in this world or the world to come. Nothing materially or spiritually. Nothing in the past, present, or future. He loves constantly and unconditionally. (See Romans 8:31-39.)

Our search for joy is over when we discover that he has found us. Our confidence does not come from anything in us. We cannot produce joy, and we can't sustain it. We can only share it. We can rejoice that God loves us and enjoys being with us. Our daily battle

is against those voices that suggest that he is not with us, that we are not his delight, that we must do something to make him happy, that we don't qualify for his presence. Only as we listen to his voice does the liberating truth of his joy break through. Dare to rejoice!



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