

HOW TO BRING JOY TO YOUR HEAVENLY FATHER

Do you have favorites – favorite foods to eat, favorite places to visit, favorite hobbies to enjoy? What are your favorites?

If we went up and down the rows and asked each person, we would find out that we all have favorites – some in common with others, and some that are unique to us as individuals. The same holds true of the Scriptures and of Scriptural themes.

The very same people who have a favorite flavor of ice cream, also often have a special Bible verse or Biblical theme that is their favorite – you know, one to which they keep coming back. For example, God’s love and John 3:16, the Lord’s prayer and other verses that relate to prayer, or Revelation 21 and 22 and other passages that talk about heaven. These and many other portions of Scripture and themes of Scripture are among those that many of us would refer to as ‘favorites’. I have my own list of Biblical favorites – Scriptures I have committed to memory, verses that God seems to use repeatedly to speak to my heart, passages I come back to often, topics that I seem to zero in on regularly as I read through the Bible. It’s one of those subjects – one of my favorite Scriptural themes – that I would like to begin investigating with you today.

Before I tell you what the topic is, allow me to give you a few general statements to kind of sketch out a framework for our study. Here goes. First of all, this theme – this topic – is an important one – a crucial subject worthy of our time and attention. Now, of course, you would expect your preacher to say that, wouldn’t you? After all, he’s the one leading the study. But, before you dismiss this as just more ‘preacher-hype’, consider this: You want to know about the heart of God - to get your finger closer to His ‘pulse’? Study this subject. It will put you there! This is an important study because it opens up the heart of God to us.

Secondly, this is an expansive study – a massive topic – one that is not isolated, miniscule or obscure. Rather, as I have come to realize, to open up this subject is to open up a Bible theme that I believe runs literally from the beginning to the end of the Bible. It is, indeed, an expansive study.

And, then, number three, this study – this Biblical topic – is or will be a provocative study – a provocative study – one that, if you will jump into it with both feet, will challenge you, confront you, comfort you and, the Lord-willing, change you in the direction God wants all of His children to go and grow – in the direction of becoming more like Jesus.

Take out a pen and paper, if you would, and jot down these three working titles for our subject:

1) “What is it That Pleases God?” 2) “How to Bring Joy to Your Heavenly Father’s Heart”. And then, 3) one that uses the actual Biblical terminology: “In These I Delight.” “In These I Delight,” declares the LORD.”

Right up front, I have to tell you that my interest in studying this subject is more than one-sided. Yes, I am interested in the topic because of its importance, and because of its expansiveness, and because of its provocative nature. But on top of all that, there is something of a personal reason why this theme catches my attention – and that’s because it relates directly to someone who is very special to me – my oldest daughter, “Abigail.”

Abby, we haven’t rehearsed it, but do you remember what your name ‘Abigail’ means?

If you couldn’t hear her, she said, “My Father’s Joy”.

One of my longings for this study is that, to a greater degree than ever before, that name “Abigail” and the meaning of that name – “My [Heavenly] Father’s Joy” – would be true of you and me.

“What is it that PLEASES God?” “In these I delight,” declares the LORD....” “How to bring JOY to your Heavenly Father’s Heart.” Let’s begin our look at this topic by asking a couple of crucial introductory questions.

First, delighting, rejoicing, pleasing. Just what do these words mean? And, more significantly, what does it mean for the LORD to delight in something? What is the Bible conveying to us when it says that the LORD rejoices over someone?

It’s amazing what you uncover when you dig into important Bible words like these. For example, I noticed that all three of these words – *delighting*, *pleasing* and *rejoicing* – are very strong, emotionally-charged words – words that communicate the strength of the feelings of one’s heart. Such things as the exultation of a newlywed bridegroom, the excited shouts of a person glad at a burden lifted or a victory won, the uninterrupted attentiveness of a first-time mother with her newborn baby, and the eager, zealous pleasure a man enjoys with his wife are all expressed by these words.

These are strong words, emotionally-charged heart words. But, how do they let us in on the heart of God? What is the Bible telling us when it says that the LORD is pleased with something – that “He rejoices over and delights in someone?”

At least two key truths have emerged in my study that I want to share with you at this point. Listen closely.

KEY TRUTH NUMBER ONE: When the Bible talks about God delighting in or rejoicing over someone, what it means

by that, what is included in this concept of pleasing God is the idea of acceptance. In other words, the person or thing that the LORD accepts is the person or thing God delights in, and vice versa.

Let me take you to two different Scripture passages to underscore what I'm talking about here. The first is found in the Book of Amos – the Old Testament prophet, penned by a man named Amos 5:16-24.

Therefore the LORD God of hosts, the Lord, says this: 16 "There shall be wailing in all streets, and they shall say in all the highways, 'Alas! Alas!' They shall call the farmer to mourning, and skillful lamenters to wailing. 17 In all vineyards there shall be wailing, for I will pass through you," says the LORD. 18 Woe to you who desire the day of the LORD! For what good is the day of the LORD to you? It will be darkness, and not light. 19 It will be as though a man fled from a lion, and a bear met him! Or as though he went into the house, leaned his hand on the wall, and a serpent bit him! 20 Is not the day of the LORD darkness, and not light? Is it not very dark, with no brightness in it? 21 "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies. 22 Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. 23 Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. 24 But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

Speaking to the people of God of his day, calling them to repent and return to God, the prophet warns his people that the so-called 'Day of the LORD' they longed for would not be a day of deliverance and victory, but a day of judgment and great loss. And why would it be that way? Because God's people were not pleasing Him. Notice the intensity of the words – the strength of the emotions they convey – beginning in verse 21. "I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies." God's not pleased, He's angry, isn't he? Verse 22 says, "Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grains offerings, I will not accept them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings. Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water" – [You wanna please Me? You want Me to rejoice over you?] "Let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

When the Bible refers to God as delighting in someone, rejoicing over someone, being pleased with someone, it's telling us, in effect, that our holy God has accepted that person.

Second scriptural example – one that probably is more familiar to all of us: Matthew 3:13-17.

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. 14 And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?" 15 But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him. 16 When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. 17 And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

The passage describes for us the momentous baptism of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. There are a lot of things to note here, but the one thing I would have you zero in on with me is found in verses 15 through 17.

Jesus – who didn't need to be baptized because of any sin in His life – instructed John the Baptizer to immerse Him. Why? "To fulfill all righteousness" – so that Jesus might do all that His Father wanted Him to do. Then what? Verses 16 and 17 – When Jesus had been immersed, He came up immediately out of the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He (Jesus) saw [and undoubtedly the Baptizer saw] the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him." Then watch what happens next. Verse 17 – "Then suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Jesus did all that His Father set forth for Him to do. He even was baptized. And being pleased with all that His Son was doing, God says, "Look, folks. Here is One in whom I delight - One whom I accept unreservedly!"

The first key truth for us to take home with us from our study of this powerful subject is simply this: The person or thing God accepts is the person or thing God delights in. God's deepest, heartfelt joy is aimed in the direction of the persons or things that are accepted by and acceptable to Him!

KEY TRUTH NUMBER TWO: a truth that hinges on the first truth. Mark it down. When one is accepted by, acceptable to God, and thus the focus of His excited and intense interest and affection, he or she also is the object of God's grace, the apple of His eye, the target of His manifold blessings. Let's look at Malachi 3:8-10.

8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. 9 You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation. 10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it."

The word of the LORD through the prophet Malachi to the Old Testament people of God. It's a familiar passage to some of us – one that relates to the subject of tithing, returning to God the first portion of that which He has given to us and entrusted to us. What does it mean to please God? And what effect does it have on our lives to be ones over whom God rejoices and in whom He delights?

Look at the wonderful promise God makes to those who will faithfully obey Him in this important financial area: Verse 10 – “Bring the whole tithe – all of it – into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and prove Me in this,” says the LORD of hosts, “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such a blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it... And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, so that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field,” says the LORD of hosts....”

What happens when a man or a woman pleases God, when he or she is the joy of His heart?

First, he's accepted by God and second, he is blessed by God - the object of God's abundant favor and grace.

Writing to Christians, the first-century Church at Ephesus – the Apostle Paul put it this way in the first chapter of that marvelous letter. He said, “Christians – the saints of god – those who are in Christ... what are they? Who are they? The joy of God. The pleasure of God. The delight of God. Christians.

Listen, Beloved. If you are IN CHRIST, you are there because He was pleased to put you there, because it brings Him intense delight to do so.

Verses 4 and 5 – “He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love. He predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself....” How? “According to the good pleasure of His will....” My Loved Ones, if you are in Christ, you are there for one reason, and one reason only. Because God delighted in putting you there!

And since Christians (those who are in Christ) are the focus of His delight - the center of His excited and intense attention, what are they? Verse 6 – They are accepted. They are accepted. “His good pleasure” – His being delighted to do His will – has worked to “make you accepted in His Beloved Son, Jesus Christ.” Furthermore, as we notice in the Malachi 3 passage, to be the target of God's rejoicing means that one is also the bull's eye of His blessings. Verse 3 – “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with EVERY SPIRITUAL BLESSING in Christ....”

So, where does all of this lead us? Well, looking at the clock, at least for the time being, it leads us in the direction of invitation time. And to a question that I pray you will keep continually before you as you take up this study as your own. That question is this: “Am I an ‘Abigail’?” Remember what my daughter's name means? “When the Father in heaven looks at me, is His heart filled with joy? Does He delight in me?” **OR** “Are His emotions stirred in an entirely different direction when He thinks of me?”

One more passage of Scripture, and then we will close. Isaiah 1:2-20:

² Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: “I have nourished and brought up children, and they have rebelled against Me; ³ The ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, My people do not consider.” ⁴ Alas, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, a brood of evildoers, children who are corrupters! They have forsaken the LORD, they have provoked to anger the Holy One of Israel, they have turned away backward. ⁵ Why should you be stricken again? You will revolt more and more. The whole head is sick, and the whole heart faints. ⁶ From the sole of the foot even to the head, there is no soundness in it, but wounds and bruises and putrefying sores; they have not been closed or bound up, or soothed with ointment. ⁷ Your country is desolate, your cities are burned with fire; strangers devour your land in your presence; and it is desolate, as overthrown by strangers. ⁸ So the daughter of Zion is left as a booth in a vineyard, as a hut in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city. ⁹ Unless the LORD of hosts had left to us a very small remnant, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been made like Gomorrah. ¹⁰ Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom; give ear to the law of our God, O people of Gomorrah: ¹¹ “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?” says the LORD. “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats. ¹² “When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand, to trample My courts? ¹³ Bring no more futile sacrifices; incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies — I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting. ¹⁴ Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them. ¹⁵ When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full

of blood. ¹⁶ “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. ¹⁸ “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword”; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The sinful, rebellious people of God of Isaiah’s day had forsaken the LORD, they had provoked Him to anger, and had turned away, turned their backs on their God.

The ‘festering sores’ of this ancient nation’s ‘sin-sickness’ were manifest everywhere – like a diseased body covered with sores, Isaiah says. So, what does this man of God, Isaiah say to God’s people? What was his advice? Offer more burnt offerings? That’ll take care of it! Slaughter more sacrificial animals??

No! Verse 11, through Isaiah, the LORD says, “I’ve had enough of all those things and I do not delight in those things.” Verses 14 and 15 – “My soul hates your religious feasts and festivals. They are a trouble to Me and I am weary of putting up with them. So I’m closing My eyes,” the LORD says, “and stopping my ears to all of it.”

Do you see the situation? God’s people, at least in Isaiah’s day, were NOT Abigails. They were not pleasing Him and they were not bringing joy to Him. Thus, God did not accept them nor was He blessing them.

So, what does God urge His people to do? Here’s where the study becomes provocative. Verses 16 through 20:

¹⁶ “Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rebuke the oppressor, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. ¹⁸ “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool. ¹⁹ If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; ²⁰ but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword”; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Action Point Number One: The people of God must change. Their outward behavior must be different from that day forward. But how is that possible?

Action Point Number Two: The second, and more significant, element of this call to repentance – they must be cleansed. “Come now, and let us reason together,” says the LORD, “ Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool.”

Any prospective ‘Abigails’ out there this morning? Do you really want to bring joy to God’s heart?

Listen, religiosity is not the way! It’s not! But regeneration – being washed by the blood of Jesus and being renewed by His Holy Spirit – IS the way!

So, where does that leave us? What must we do, if we would be God’s ‘Abigails’?

Isaiah 1:18, 19 and 20: “ Come – NOW - let us reason together,” God’s saying. “Let’s discuss this matter – hash it out – NOW – TODAY. Let’s look at the options you have before you – and the consequences of selecting each one of them.”

“Come - now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. Scarlet sins – they can be as white as snow; crimson red transgressions – they can be as wool...before My eyes... IF...IF you are willing and obedient – IF you do not refuse my gracious invitation. IF you stop rebelling against Me.”

You understand the situation, don’t you? Pleasing God – being one of His ‘Abigails’ is a choice each one of us must make. “Come – now – make your choice for the LORD – today, will you? Will you? NOW – today? Zephaniah 3:16 – 20:

“In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem: ‘Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. ¹⁷ The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing. ¹⁸ I will gather those who sorrow over the appointed assembly, who are among you, to whom its reproach is a burden. ¹⁹ Behold, at that time I will deal with all who afflict you; will save the lame, and gather those who were driven out; I will appoint them for praise and fame in every land where they were put to shame. ²⁰ At that time I will bring you back, even at the time I gather you; for I will give you fame and praise among all the peoples of the earth, when I return your captives before your eyes,” says the LORD.

Let’s pray.