

RANSOMED
HEART
ministries

October 2007

Dear Friends,

A few years ago a woman with a sensitive spirit and a keen eye for what God is up to pulled me aside to offer this warning: “The battle in your life is against your joy.” It hit me like a Mac truck.

But of course. Suddenly, life made sense. The hassles. The battles. The disappointments. The losses. The resignation. Why hadn't I seen it before? I mean, I face a lot of different skirmishes day to day, but now the diabolical plot behind them all came into view. I began to see how the enemy was first trying to take away all joy from my life. Wear me down. Then, weary and thirsty, I would be most vulnerable to some counterfeit joy. It would start with mild addictions, then build to something worse.

Her observation became a revelation became a rescue. The smoke alarm sounding off before the house goes up in flames. For several days the whole world made sense in light of joy. But in the day-to-day grind of the ensuing months, all that clarity slipped away. Completely. Joy as a category seemed...irrelevant. Nice, but unessential. Like owning a hot tub. And distant, too. The hot tub is in Fiji. Wouldn't it be nice. Ain't going to happen. Life's not really about Joy. I've got all this *stuff* that has to get done. The mail is stacking up and I haven't paid the bills in two months. The “fix engine” light came on in the Honda. Joy? Life's about surviving, maybe a little pleasure. That's what seemed true.

Really now – how much do you think about joy? Do you see it as essential to your life, something God insists on?

I was thinking of a great day I had summer before last. Sam, Blaine and I rode our horses together up through the woods. The sunlight was filtering down through the aspens as we followed an old game trail we'd never taken before. Our golden retriever Scout was running on ahead of us. The horses seemed to be enjoying it as much as we were. It was cool under the canopy of aspens. Quiet. Timeless. In the evening, Blaine and I took the canoe over to a high mountain reservoir fed by a beautiful rushing stream. We paddled about a half mile from the put-in back to the inlet. The trout were rising. Not another soul was around. For an hour we caught rainbows on dry flies, surrounded by mountains, the rushing inlet the only sound of the evening. On the way home we saw a fox, and a porcupine.

It was an incredible day. One of those rare and glorious days that become, over time, the icon of summer vacation in our memories. So – why didn't I wake with a joyful heart the next day? Joy was just here. Where did it go? I feel like I met a stranger on an airplane. And we clicked. We swapped some stories, had a few drinks, laughed together. Then I drove home to an empty house. Its like that. I had an encounter with joy. It touched a longing. Now I begin to realize I haven't even given ten minutes to joy, let alone pursued it as essential to my life.

It has to do with agreements I've made without even knowing it. By “agreement” I mean those subtle convictions we come to, or assent to, or give way to. It happens down deep in our souls where our real beliefs about life are formed. Something or someone whispers to us, *Life is never going to turn out the way you'd hoped, or, Nobody's going to come through, or, God has forsaken you.* And

something in us responds with, *That's true*. We make an agreement with it. A conviction is formed. It seems so reasonable. I think we come to more of our beliefs in this way than maybe any other. Subtle agreements.

Anyhow, I begin to realize that what I've done for most of my life is resign myself to this idea: *I'm really not going to have any lasting joy*. And from that resignation gone on to try and find what I could have. Now to be fair, joy isn't exactly falling from the sky these days. We don't go out to gather it each morning like manna. It's hard to come by. Joy seems more elusive than winning the lottery. We don't like to think about it much, because it hurts to allow ourselves to feel how much we long for joy, and how seldom it drops by.

But joy *is* the point. I know it is. God says that joy is our strength: "The joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nehemiah 8:10). I think, *My strength!? I don't even think of it as my occasional boost*. But yes, now that I give it some thought, I can see that when I *have* felt joy I have felt more alive than any other time in my life. Pull up a memory of one of your best moments. The day at the beach. You're eighth birthday. Remember what you felt like. Now – think what life would be like if you felt like that on a regular basis. Maybe that's what being strengthened by joy feels like. It would be good.

I take up a concordance, and begin to read a bit on joy. "My heart leaps with joy" (Psalm 28:7). When was the last time my heart leapt with joy? I don't even remember. "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound" (Psalm 4:7). I believe him. I believe God does this. I just can't say I really know firsthand what he's talking about. I turn to the Gospels. What does Jesus have to say about joy? "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, and your joy will be complete" (John 16:24).

Joy complete? The full measure of his joy? That's what he wants for us?!! I'm almost stunned. I can't believe it's come down to joy. It's so obvious now, and yet, it makes me really uncomfortable. Joy is such a tender thing, I think we resent it. We avoid it, because it feels too vulnerable to allow ourselves to admit the joy we long for but do not have. But I know this – I know we were meant for joy, and I know I can't continue to live with only occasional sips of it. I found myself praying, *Jesus, I have no idea where to go from here. But I invite you in. Bring me all the joy you have for me. Help me to see it when it comes. Help me not resign myself to surviving. Restore my joy*.

For your joy as well,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'John' written in a cursive, flowing style.

John