

Joy Prescribed

Proverbs 17:22

By [Wiley Lowry](#)

As you're seated, if you would turn with me in your Bibles to Proverbs chapter 17. It's found on page 540 in your pew Bibles. And we're going to look at one proverb tonight - verse 22 of chapter 17. It's a proverb which contrasts a joyful heart and a crushed spirit. We're in a season of the year that is associated with thanksgiving and joy. There's time off of school, time off of work. There's gathering with family and friends. There's good food, there's gifts, there's festive decorations. And yet at the same time these months can be marked also by the winter blues, or season depression. The technical term is "seasonal affective disorder." That spells the acronym SAD if you're keeping up. It could be caused by shorter days, more time indoors. Those same gatherings with family and friends may bring up some brokenness in the family, some family tensions. It could bring up the memory of a loved one who has passed away. That same delicious food could add some unwanted pounds. The gift-list that you have may put a strain on your budget. So we feel at this time of year a tension between a joyful heart and a crushed spirit.

I was talking with a friend the other day and he said that someone told him it was nothing a couple of sessions in the tanning bed couldn't help! I can't recommend that! Instead we'll turn to the proverb, what the proverb lays out for us - the unique blessing of spiritual joy, of Gospel joy. So as we turn to this passage and before we read, let's pray and ask God's blessing.

Father, we do yearn for joy, a joy that comes from You, a joy that lasts forever. We ask that You would bless our reading and our hearing of Your Word tonight to cultivate this joy in our lives. And we pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Proverbs chapter 17 verse 22 says this:

"A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones."

I just want to look at this in two parts tonight. First is, "What does it mean to have dry bones or a crushed spirit?" And then, "How do we cultivate this joyful heart?"

I. What Does it Mean to have Dry Bones and a Crushed Spirit?

As with many of the proverbs, this passage, this verse, gives us a simple concept and yet it's a tough reality. It's easy enough, it's basic enough to communicate this truth in a proverb, in a memorable proverb, and yet it's often a challenge to live this way. There are many of us, I would say most of us, who have experienced the effects of a crushed spirit at times. There's something you've wanted, maybe it's something that you still desire, and you've prayed long and hard for it, and yet God has not given you that request. Maybe there's someone who's hurt you deeply with their words or with their actions and you feel betrayed and alone. Maybe you've filled your calendar with one activity after the other, from a party to a trip to a game to a performance to a hobby, and yet it just doesn't satisfy. There's still a restlessness, a longing, that doesn't seem to go away. When these sorts of experiences add up and they multiply and they persist and they start to dominate our thoughts and our emotions, it leads to a crushed spirit. It leads to dry bones. We need to have joy, we need to have real joy presented before us and embraced and taken down deep. To say that in a different way, we could say it in a more timely manner. We need to consider what we are thankful for. We're not always good at expressing joy; we're not always good at showing gratitude. Think about it. We have one day a year that we set aside for thanksgiving to be thankful for all that we have, and yet the very next day is the number one day of the year for doing what? Getting more stuff. Even the day Thanksgiving is starting to fade. You hear more generic terms like Turkey Day or Brown Thursday or some other ridiculous term. But the point is, if we're not very good or if we rarely show gratitude and joy, then we let sorrow, we start to dwell on sorrow and on unmet desires and on disappointments and those things lead to a crushed spirit, a spirit of despondency, a spirit of despair, a spirit of depression.

An Expression of Death

Our proverb tells us that "a crushed spirit dries up the bones." That's clearly an expression of death. These are emotions that are lifeless; they're hopeless. It's a feeling of having been discarded or being useless. Actually it's worse than that. It's being emotionless. Being dull, flat, numb. Charles Bridges in his commentary on Proverbs says that "this is a sorrow that cannot weep." This is a sorrow that cannot weep. The image of the dry bones, it calls to our mind, doesn't it, the other Biblical passage of dry bones - Ezekiel. Remember his vision of the valley of dry bones in Ezekiel chapter 37. God shows him this wide valley, full of dead bones, and God says to him, "Can these bones live?" Ezekiel says, "O Lord God, you know." He's saying, "You know they cannot live. These bones cannot be further from life." There's not a trace of life left on these bones and yet God commands Ezekiel to prophecy and Ezekiel follows God's commands and he prophecies and God breathes life back into the bones. He gathers them, collects them together, and they stand before Ezekiel as a great host of men and God says to Ezekiel, He says, "Son of man, these bones of the whole house of Israel, behold they say, 'Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are indeed cut off.'" Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are indeed cut off. You see,

that expresses the depth of their despair, that God's people had been ransacked, they had been split apart, and they had been sent into exile. They say, "Our bones are dried up, our hope is lost, we are cut off."

A Situation Common to the People of God

You see, God's people are not immune from these dry bones type experiences. Even when it's not a result or a consequence for their sin as it was in the case of their exile. We can think of Job and all his horrible, horrendous suffering and trials with the loss of his children, the loss of his possessions, the plague of disease and pain, and then the insult that came along with that from his wife and from his friends. And Job cries out in despair. He despairs of the day of his birth. He cries out in anguish and frustration. Think about the psalmist in Psalm 88 where he's lamenting a certain trial. He talks about that his friends and his loved one has shunned him and he says that his companions had become darkness, that "darkness was his friend." That was how deep was his experience of a crushed spirit.

You see, the Bible doesn't ignore these type of painful trials. The Bible is not there just to give us some sort of pep talk or motivational speech about our best life now or the power of positive thinking. The Bible does much more than that. The Bible acknowledges the burdens of living in a fallen world. It actually gives words, it gives expression to our emotions, to our thoughts of despair and grief, and it proclaims a way of deliverance and of hope. Our Savior Himself was not untouched with these types of feelings and emotions. You remember when He was preparing to go to His death on the cross He cried out in the garden, "I am exceedingly sorrowful, even unto death." And it was on the cross that He cried out, "My God, My God! Why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus went to that dark place and He sympathizes with us. He knows what concerns us and what our needs are, what causes us pain and grief. He knows those things. He sympathizes with us and He intercedes for us at the right hand of God. And He even gives us a purpose in our sufferings that our sufferings, as we experience them, make us like Christ. All this is to say that God's people go through dark times. They tend to have their spirits crushed.

The Problem of Pain

And I think we can highlight two causes of this type of crushed spirit. One is the problem of pain and the other is the problem of pleasure. The first to think about - the problem of pain. There's the pain of disease, the pain of injury, the pain of an aging body, the pain of a loved ones death, or the pain of being mistreated, persecuted, ignored. And over time, those things and a combination of multiple trials, they tend to wear one down. It seems that these things have dragged on ever since you can remember. You know Paul says in 2 Corinthians he talks about our light affliction which is "but for a moment." Well sometimes our afflictions seem anything but light and momentary. This is the kind of experience

that a crushed spirit is talking about. Before long, you start to sink into a pattern of sluggishness, disinterest, maybe even doubt.

You know Charles Spurgeon, the great preacher from England, he was not unfamiliar with those seasons of life. Spurgeon, in 1856, he was preaching to a crowd of over 10,000 people, not much different from what we have here tonight! He was in the music hall of Royal Surrey Gardens, over 10,000 people. And while he was preaching someone yelled out, "Fire!" as a joke, perhaps. And the rush of people to get out of the exits caused a stampede and it killed seven people and many others were injured. And that event really haunted Spurgeon for the rest of his life. One of his biographers say that was possibly what led to his early death. Spurgeon's wife, at the age of thirty-three, became a virtual invalid. He was left taking care of an ill wife for the rest of his life. She rarely ever heard him preach for the next twenty-seven years. Spurgeon himself suffered from various ailments. He had gout and other painful conditions. And despite his overwhelming popularity he faced criticism and ridicule from the press and from other ministers throughout the town and country. And he struggled with depression for much of his ministry, a depression which he says or he defied as "a shapeless, un-definable, yet all-beclouding hopelessness." And yet Spurgeon persevered and his powerful preaching ministry continues to impact and encourage and strengthen believers to this very day. You see, Spurgeon know the problem of pain. He knew the struggle of a crushed spirit. And I think that it's an encouragement for us to think about his life and the lives that are presented to us in the Bible, that hardships don't mean that God doesn't love us. It may mean that He's chastising us, but God chastens those who He loves. And just because we go through these times of darkness, it doesn't mean that we should despair of our salvation, but it may very well mean that God is using that very time of darkness to do a great work for His kingdom. God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

The Problem of Pleasure

And so just as we have the problem of pain, we also have the problem of pleasure. Our first inclination is to think that pleasure is the exact opposite of a crushed spirit. And in fact, we may be prone to confuse the two, to think that the pursuit of pleasure equals the pursuit of joy. But that's not always the case. Sometimes it may actually be the opposite and the pursuit of pleasure leads to a crushed spirit. Because any time we put something in God's rightful place or we desire something more than God and His ways or we try to find a way to live part way in God's ways and part way in our ways, then we're going to face disappointments and we're going to face letdowns, unfulfilled desires. You know we've channeled all of our energies and our efforts to have the family that we've always wanted or to achieve a certain amount of success or respectability or popularity. We've looked to experiences and to the latest trends to find our self satisfied, to make our self satisfied. And yet we find ourselves always asking, "What's next?" Or we find ourselves saying, "One more. I just need one more."

Or maybe it's a particular temptation you struggle with, an addiction, self-righteousness or gossip. You know those things may feel good in the moment and they may tend to distract us from the things that we're really lacking, the things that we're really missing and need, but they can't bear the load that we're putting on them. They can't produce this lasting joy that our proverb is pointing us to. It's like the Israelites, as David read to us last week, when they were forced to produce bricks without straw, when we put our hopes and rest our joys on these earthly pleasures, it's like making bricks without straw - it won't hold up, you can't do it, it won't last.

And so just as there's a sorrow that cannot weep, there's also a mirth that cannot laugh. Martin Lloyd-Jones was, many consider, the greatest preacher of the 20th century. Many of you may know that he was also a physician. Before he became a pastor he was a doctor, actually a very successful doctor. And he kept up that hobby or that interest in medicine throughout the rest of his life and he would speak many times to gatherings of physicians and Christian physicians, leading Bible studies and those sorts of things. And he tells a story about, in his practice, that the chief physician there at the hospital had a project for him to do. He had a big list, a rolodex, of his patients and their conditions. But what he wanted to get, he wanted Lloyd-Jones to take all of those conditions on that list and make a list of the conditions with the names underneath them so he could go from the condition and find the person's name that it was associated with. And he says that as he gathered these lists and he looked at the people's condition and their names, he said that in over half of the cases the diagnosis was something like, "He eats too much. He drinks too much. He doesn't get enough sleep." And what he was highlighting and indicating was that indulgence leads to illness; it leads to heartache.

II. How do We Cultivate this Joyful Heart?

And so you see that there's a problem of pain but there's also a problem of pleasure. And so what our proverb prescribes in its place is a joyful heart, apart from the problem of pain and the problem of pleasure. A joy that's real. A joy that's serious. It's a joy that's a joy in the soul and it comes from knowing God and contemplating Him in all of His glory, in all of His goodness, in all of His faithfulness. It's a joy that flows from a devotion to God so that all of life is lived out in worship to Him. The parts of a joyful heart is it consists of delight and gratitude and humility, praise and freedom and trust, confidence and hope. That's a joyful heart. That's what the proverb is calling us to. That's what we all desire, isn't it? We all desire a joyful heart so that our worship is vibrant, so that our relationships are healthy, our work is productive, our leisure is refreshing. And yet to make that joy our chief aim sets us off the course. Instead, our chief aim, our first priority is to be God Himself. Just as our catechism tells us, that "our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." It's that glorifying God and making Him chief in our life that brings about this kind of joy that is good

medicine. It's the kind of joy that brings about healing and wholeness.

Marveling at Our Great God

I love in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, those stories written by C.S. Lewis, the way he portrays joy. Joy was a central feature of Lewis' life and he writes about the way that joy transforms the whole land of Narnia when Aslan comes on the scene. You know Aslan is the lion who represents God in those stories and when Aslan comes to Narnia then the snow melts, the trees come to life, the flowers bloom, and all the features and characteristics of all these creatures begin to come out. They were hidden and now they're awakened and the creatures can live as they were supposed to live, as they were designed to. That's what joy is in Narnia. It's coming to life. And it all comes because Aslan has arrived. The joy comes because of Aslan. The joy comes because of God. There's a scene in *Prince Caspian*, the book, *Prince Caspian*, and Lucy notices, she meets Aslan for the first time and she notices that he seems bigger than she remembered. And she asked him if he had gotten older. And he said, "No." He said, "But every year you grow you will find me bigger." Every year you grow, you will find me bigger. You see, if we desire joy in the changing circumstances of our lives then we must find God bigger, we must find God bigger than our circumstances, bigger than our worries, bigger than our efforts. The writer of Proverbs would call that the fear of the Lord. It's the right fear of the Lord which is awe and reverence and love and adoration for God and all of His holy attributes and all of His mighty works. How does God appear bigger in our eyes? It's contemplating Him in all of His wonder and His power and His glory in the creation around us, in the display of the colors on the canvas of the leaves outside of us, in the mighty winds and strong force that blows around us. It's seeing God's wisdom and beauty in a small child, in a newborn baby. It's seeing God in the power of His creation that we begin to awe and wonder and marvel at who God is.

Considering Again the Work of Christ in Salvation

But even more so, it's seeing God as we consider the work of His salvation. We see God most fully revealed in Christ. And as we look to the cross we see God's justice and His mercy. We see that our sin, which separates us from God, it sets us in rebellion and alienation against God, that God pours out His love to rescue us from our sin, to draw us to Himself, to restore us into relationship with Him, and to give us pardon and freedom and joy and a relationship with Him. In Christ God becomes bigger. You see, the cross shows us that we are far more sinful than we ever realize but it also shows us that we are far more loved than we could ever imagine. In Christ, God becomes bigger. His way is perfect, His love inexhaustible, His grace sufficient, His promises true, and His reward beyond comparison.

Faithful Plodding of the Ordinary Christian Life

So often we want to do things our own way and in our own time. When sadness comes we don't really expect it. We don't like sadness. We want it to be gone immediately and we look for shortcuts to avoid pain. We try to conjure up techniques that many times leave God as a footnote or like an appendix tacked onto the back of a book. But that makes God small and it makes us big. If we want joy, then we must decrease, we must deny ourselves. God must increase. He must become greater in our eyes. Ravi Zacharias, in a sermon on making decisions, he talks about when we make our choices we have to determine whether our will is going to be surrendered to Him and do things His way or whether we're going to try to live half of life our way and half of life His way. He says it should not be the case, but he says that "when you do things God's way it is a perpetual novelty and there's a boundlessness to the delight of doing it God's way." What is it doing it God's way? It's reading the Bible, going before Him in prayer, spending fellowship with one another, being pointed to Christ in baptism and the Lord's Supper. It's sharing the Gospel with others. What is doing it God's way? It's really the ordinary Christian life. A lifelong process of producing joy. It's not a quick-fix. It doesn't happen overnight. But if we're willing to trust God and let Him do it in His way in His timing, the Holy Spirit will produce joy in our hearts and that joy is good medicine.

Focusing on the Giver

You know there's a sense in which this can be applied to the actual physical healing, that when we have joyful hearts we heal, our bodies heal better than when we are downcast and in despair. But there's also a way in which we could apply this in a way that would transform our Thanksgivings because it's a joy that's focused on the giver and not on the gift. We may be bogged down in our circumstances and things may not be quite right or the food might not taste quite as good as we want it to taste, and yet this kind of joy focusing on God, not on our circumstances but on the One who works all things together for our good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. It enriches our fellowship, it enriches our gratitude, it enriches our food when we have this type of joy.

A Joy which Transforms Our Sorrow

And the last thing is, this joy also transforms our sorrow. You know just because this joy is a presence in the believer's life doesn't mean that we won't face sorrows and disappointments. We will walk through the valley of the shadow of death and yet with this kind of joy we can say with Habakkuk as he writes in the last verses of that book, he says, "Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor the fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the field and there be no herds in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will take joy in the God of my salvation. God the Lord is my strength. He makes my feet like the deer's; He makes me tread on my high places." You see, that's a sorrow that rejoices. So not only is there a sorrow that

cannot weep and a mirth that cannot laugh, there is a sorrow that rejoices and it is a compelling witness to the world around us that when we grieve we do not grieve as those who have no hope but our hope is in Christ. Our eyes are directed to Him; the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy before Him endured the cross, despising its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God. We look to Him. Focus on Him. Do it in God's way. Do it in God's time. Don't give up. Don't let up. Keep doing it God's way and trust Him and the Holy Spirit to work and to produce this joy in our lives.

Let's go to the Lord in prayer.

Father, we do praise You for the blessing of joy, of salvation, of Your creation, for this time together before Your Word. Would You lead us out from here with great joy that it would permeate through the rest of our week, through our families, in our sorrows, in our trials, in our responsibilities, that we would glorify You and honor You with all we do. We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen.

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