

FIND THE HOPE TO LIGHT YOUR WAY, EVEN IN THE DARKNESS

Jennifer Michelle Greenberg

# Defiant Joy

# Find the Hope to Light Your Way,

# **Even in the Darkness**

Jennifer Michelle Greenberg



MULTNOMAH

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And to our three little girls: *Elowyn, Leianor,* and *Gwynevere.* I know that God loves me, because he gave me you.

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## Letter to the Reader

Dear reader,

My study of joy began many years ago. It was October 2012, and as I looked into the blue eyes of my beautiful newborn daughter, I felt nothing. There was this void in my heart, as if someone had reached in and scooped out part of my personality, removing my ability to feel happy. It terrified me. Of all the times in my life, this was supposed to be the brightest, yet I felt numb and deadened.

Part of this was no doubt due to exhaustion. As a new mom, I was still recovering from pregnancy and waking up every two hours at night to care for a colicky infant. Another part was because of postpartum depression, which I eventually sought medical treatment to recover from. But still another part was that I didn't understand joy or know where it came from.

I'd never been taught that. Not even in church.

So I set out on an expedition to uncover this mysterious treasure I was missing. I came to find that joy—real, pure, eternal joy—is a gift from God. It's not something I can generate on my own. It's not a situation where I can "fake it 'til I make it." Most important, to feel joy, I first needed to learn to rest in the knowledge that God is the creator and sustainer of my faith.

Faith, like joy, isn't something I can muster up. It's not a job I can accomplish or a chore I can check off my to-do list. God isn't a celestial snack machine who, when given the right amount of change, dispenses spiritual treats. That's just not how life works, and the Bible never says it does.

But I didn't come to this conclusion quickly or easily.

It took a lot of study, prayer, and wrestling with God in Scripture.

You see, as a child, I was taught that in order to be a good Christian, I needed to always act happy. Even if my situation was stressful or sad, I was expected to pretend I was okay. You've probably encountered similar ideas. Self-help gurus claim that if you have a positive attitude, you'll attract positive energy and good things will happen to you. Prosperity-gospel teachers claim that if you have enough faith, think positively, and donate money to their ministries, you'll receive health, wealth, and well-being.

I recently heard the testimony of a dear sister in Christ who believed that her refrigerator had remained in good working order because she had faithfully tithed for thirty years. She viewed this as a sign that God was pleased with her obedience. But what happens when her fridge finally does break? In that moment, will she think God is displeased? Will she think it's because she's done something wrong?

The logical inference is that if something bad happens to you, it must be your fault. If you experience suffering, it must be because God is disappointed in your flimsy faith or sketchy prayer life. If you're sad, exhausted, lonely, or anxious—if you lose your job, get a flat tire, or your kid gets a bad grade in school—it must be because you're a bad Christian, or not a real Christian at all.

In this book, we're going to upend those lies. We're going to flip the tables of the money changers and happiness gurus. We're going to learn what joy really means. And let's not stop there. Let's get into the trenches and dismantle the lies that drown out our joy. Let's deconstruct the false theologies that destabilize our faith and make us feel far from God. In their place, let's allow Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith—to overwhelm us with his joy.

My plan for this book is to take you on a spiritual archaeologi-

cal dig. We'll take a deep dive into Scripture, excavate, and dust off the joy of the Lord. We'll rediscover the promises of God that have become tarnished, hidden, and, sometimes, even lost.

Together, let's experience joy again-maybe even for the first time ever.

Much love,

Jenn

Part 1

# Joy Is a Promise from God

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm. . . .

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly.

— H E B R E W S 12:18, 22

1

# Inexplicable Joy

## How Can We Be Happy When Life Is Sad?

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

-1 PETER 1:8

I HAVE A wonderful life. I've been married to my best friend, Jason, for sixteen years. We have three beautiful daughters, who are brilliant, hilarious, feisty, and imaginative. We live in a pretty house in a safe neighborhood, with a mischievous husky puppy named Luna and a chronically underwhelmed cat named Shadowfax. Jason's parents live just a few minutes away, so every busy week is punctuated with family gatherings where Papa and Daddy grill dinner, and Gramma coordinates crafts or gardening projects. Not everything is perfect and we have our days, but in many ways it's an idyllic life.

A few weeks ago, I was sitting next to my youngest daughter. I

can't remember what we were talking about (probably Minecraft, toads, fashion, or one of her friends), but suddenly I was overwhelmed with joy and gratitude for her. She's a spunky and precocious first grader with curly hair, missing teeth, and bright blue eyes like her daddy's. Looking into her eyes is like seeing God's promises fulfilled, because she has come true. I never thought I would have these blessings. I never thought life could be this happy. Because it wasn't always this way.

I grew up in a churchgoing, homeschooling family, with four younger sisters. My mom was a talented artist who loved to paint, draw, and teach children. My father had a PhD in biology, taught Sunday school, and could debate any theologian. But despite all his education and intellect, he couldn't seem to understand love. Despite every reason and opportunity for happiness and health, our home was marred by abuse.

Child abuse may seem like an odd thing to talk about in a book about joy, but in order to uncover joy, we must understand what hides it. What are the sins that blind us to it? What are the traumas that make it difficult to grasp? What are the fears that stifle it?

For me, I was taught that my emotions didn't matter or weren't real. If I was offended by my father's cruel or perverse words, I was told to stop being dramatic and act happy. If I was frightened by his violence and unchecked rage, I was told to honor him and act as if he were honorable. Even if my dad didn't apologize, I was told to forgive him, which—at least in our family—meant pretending that everything was fine.

So, by our definition, to forgive was to lie. I had to tell him I forgave him, even though I wanted to run away. I had to tell him I was okay and then go ice my hand-shaped bruises. I had to thank him for his "compliments" and then go put on another layer of clothes. But if I didn't "forgive"—if I refused to lie and expressed my sorrow, pain, or anger—I was told that God would

not forgive me. As a result of this manipulative theology and twisting of words, I felt guilty when I forgave but feared damnation if I did not. God's Word was weaponized to control my behavior, destroy my hope, kill my faith, and eradicate my joy.

When the outside world looked at my family, they saw a conservative Christian façade, but in the privacy of our home, we were broken, depressed, and terrified. We lived a lie devoid of joy. I think deep down I always knew it was a lie, but I also didn't understand the truth. How can an abused child distinguish between what's rational and what's irrational—what's healthy and what's dysfunctional? Abuse is what I was used to, and joy was alien.

Even as an adult, just a few years ago I couldn't say for sure I'd ever felt real joy. I had escaped my abusive home and was happily married with three little girls of my own. Nevertheless, joy was an elusive emotion. I heard joy sung about in Christmas carols but never experienced it, at least not fully. I remember being thrilled by its presence at my wedding or while opening gifts on my birthday or when holding my newborn baby, but just as I'd reach out to embrace joy, it slipped away like the memory of a dream.

Have you ever felt the same? Have you ever felt so broken and worn down by sorrow that you weren't sure you could ever feel happy again? Have you ever been so exhausted by suffering that you didn't have the energy to muster up happiness? What hardships, losses, or troubles have made—or are still making—joy feel unattainable to you?

My friend, I am here to tell you that there is a joy available to you that transcends human happiness. It's a joy that can be found only in God. A joy that doesn't depend upon us or our past or how wise or good or positive we may try to be. An inexplicable joy that shines so brightly that its rays of hope pierce our darkest nights.

But if this deep joy is accessible, why don't we experience it?

Our own human frailty, fears, and traumas often blind us to the brilliance of this joy. If we do manage to grasp it even for a moment, many people seek to snatch it away. You see, there's a spiritual war raging around and within us. False teachers in the church, worldly philosophies, and shallow spiritual platitudes tenaciously work to stifle, cheapen, and distract us from joy.

#### **Twisted Scripture**

AN INTERACTION WITH Walter, a pastor I once met, left me particularly unsettled. "You should have rejoiced when you were abused," he said. "The Bible says, 'The joy of the LORD is your strength' and 'Count it all joy when you're persecuted!'<sup>1</sup> Nothing you can suffer in this life is nearly as bad as what Jesus went through, so to complain about being abused is ungrateful. If you're a real Christian and truly have faith, you should be thankful and joyful that you were abused, not depressed about it."

I knew the verses he was referencing, but at the time, I didn't have a solid understanding of what they meant. I asked myself, how can we have "the joy of the LORD" amid terrible suffering? How can we "count it all joy" when we're miserable—as we're burying a loved one, battling cancer, negotiating a divorce, or desperately searching for employment? How can we feel happy when we feel betrayed, abandoned, lonely, or oppressed? Does joyful even mean happy? And if we don't feel joy, are we sinning?

Then I wondered, can joy and sorrow coincide? Are they truly opposite emotions, or can they flow and blend together like watercolor paints on the canvases of our souls? Like blue and gold, darkness and light, hot and cold, can they run together like the pigments and shadows of a sunset? And is sorrow really the antithesis of joy, or do they work in tandem to make our love more beautiful to God?

I knew Jesus well enough to recognize that Walter's application of God's Word was wrong. I also knew, through painful experience, that spiritual abusers cherry-pick verses, rip them out of context, and twist them to mean things God does not. The Bible expressly warns that the wrath of God will be poured out against those who lie in this way.

Walter's particular twisting reminded me of a scene in *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, when Ron Weasley halfheartedly tries to read Harry Potter's future through tea leaves. Ron dubiously tells his best friend, "You're gonna suffer, but you're gonna be happy about it."<sup>2</sup> Those teen wizards knew that was a bad read. Professor Trelawney instantly dismissed it as ridiculous. As Christians, we should too.

Hopefully, not many Christians are reading tea leaves like Ron, but sadly, Christians like Walter are common. Too many of us have shallow understandings of Scripture. Some have embraced secular ideologies or invented unwise doctrines based on what they wish were true. Some may feel their faith shaken by the depression and suffering of others, so rather than try to understand or help, they seek to hush it up. Hypocrites and spiritual abusers intentionally weaponize Scripture to deceive, manipulate, and silence the hurting, while others who mean no harm may genuinely misunderstand Scripture or passively accept bad theology passed down to them by their parents and church leaders.

When we listen to these lies, the result is unbiblical theology that's more akin to a "gong or a clanging cymbal"<sup>3</sup> than to the love of Jesus. It wrecks our efforts to counsel wisely. It impedes our ability to pastor and preach to the brokenhearted effectively. It garbles our ministry to the point that when unbelievers hear things like what Walter told me, they hear the very opposite of the truth. They're left thinking Christians are apathetic or disconnected, that the gospel is unrelatable, that God's love is unattainable, and that the Bible is not applicable to their lives or experiences. Joy, they think, must be found outside of faith.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

God's joy doesn't deny reality; it exists despite it. It's not an opiate that numbs us to hardship or a quick fix, miracle cure, or spiritual vaccine to inoculate us against sadness. Rather, when Jesus endured the cross, he fixed his eyes on the joy set before him.<sup>4</sup> Despite his agony and grief, he clung to the promise of a reality unseen—of a bliss yet to come. Joy and sorrow, hope and misery, faith and distress blended perfectly and flowed together in the heart of our sinless Savior, fully God yet fully human.

Why do some of us try to comfort with hollow sentiments and misapplied verses like "Count it all joy!" or "The joy of the LORD is your strength!"—when we have such a perfect example of joy and sorrow intermingling? Would Walter have dared to speak those words to the Son of God while he hung on the cross? What counsel or encouragement could we have offered Jesus in his time of desperate need?

If someone is in pain but all we know how to do is pile guilt and impossible standards onto their already tired shoulders, how can we possibly help them? How can we imagine we're rightly representing the One who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest"?<sup>5</sup>

If we believe joy is a task we must accomplish even when all we can feel is exhaustion, then what is rest? What is grace? What did Jesus come to save us from? Before Jesus, we had the Ten Commandments and the Mosaic Law to govern our actions and attitudes. After Jesus, are we really to believe that now even our emotions are governed by rules? If this is true, Christ brought more legalism, not grace.

We rightly reason that salvation should result in happiness, but we don't seem to understand when, why, or how. As a result, we don't know what to do with grief. We've read just enough Bible to regurgitate a few verses out of context, rather than ask questions we're too afraid to hear the answers to. We tend to take the mentally lazy route, rather than dig into Scripture as the gold mine it is.

We desperately want to assume that we have some measure of control—that if we're good enough, dress right, eat right, live in the right neighborhood, tithe 10 percent, and smile really big, we'll never get divorced, get robbed, be abused, go bankrupt, or suffer a major health crisis. We believe that if we check the right boxes, we'll be blessed, life will be easy, and we'll be happy. We opt for a works-righteous, pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps, DIYed happiness. A positivity we can produce. A joy we can counterfeit.

It's scary to consider that sorrow might be a normal part of being a Christian or that life will be hard no matter how well we follow Jesus. Because if that's true, where will our joy come from? Can we really trust God that much? Can we love him even when life is hard?

### Don't Worry, Be Happy

WHEN I WAS a kid, a friend of my dad's went on a business trip. While he was away, he let us "pet sit" his Big Mouth Billy Bass. You may remember these As Seen On TV gimmicks from the late nineties. It was a rubber fish mounted on a wooden plaque, and when it detected motion nearby, it danced and sang this Bobby McFerrin song: Here's a little song I wrote. You might want to sing it note for note. Don't worry, be happy.<sup>6</sup>

Rather embarrassingly, that rubber fish summed up perfectly the theology of many a Christian. *Having a bad day? Feeling like a dead fish pinned to a wooden plaque? Don't worry! Be happy! Sing a little song to the Lord no matter what your circumstances are. Stop complaining about all the death and the nails. Jesus had it worse, right? Faith up!* 

These Big Mouth Billy Christians peddle counterfeit joy. But like all manifestations of works-righteousness, legalism, or the prosperity gospel—whatever you want to call it—it's an easy trap to fall into. Perhaps we want so badly to believe that Jesus makes us happy that we pretend to be happy even when we're not. Maybe we're so desperate to earn or deserve God's favor that we shoehorn emotions into our repertoire that we don't actually feel. And sometimes, I think, we want to prove to ourselves and others that God is active in our hearts. We fear being judged. We fear failing to conform to a make-believe standard. We feel it's up to us to fit in and look saved. But that's not the gospel—that's a cage. That's not God's joy—that's theatrics and performance faith.

When we mistake joy for a job or resist the call to rely wholly on Jesus, we set ourselves up for confusion and heartbreak during intermittent seasons of suffering. And suffering *will* come. In those times, it might be tempting to pretend we're okay rather than face the possibility that we're not. It may feel safer to put on our Instagram smile than consider that maybe we're not *supposed* to be happy given our circumstances. And because hiding from our own pain and sorrow is tempting and feels safer, when it comes time to comfort the brokenhearted, we tend to say exceptionally unhelpful and superficial things like "Don't worry," "Be happy," "God's got this," and "Count it all joy." Yet sometimes we can't feel happy. When we're unhappy, we're sad, and when we're sad, we sometimes cry. If we're commanded to always be happy—to embrace suffering and loss with a smile then our tears are in direct opposition to this command. Sorrow becomes sin. Tears become lack of faith. Grief becomes shameful.

Usually when I encounter Big Mouth Billy Christians, I point to when Jesus wept at the grave of his close friend Lazarus.<sup>7</sup> If the holy Son of God can cry, then clearly crying is not sin. Jesus is powerful enough to cast out demons and raise the dead, so weeping can't be indicative of weakness. Or maybe I'll cite the traumatic night in the Garden of Gethsemane before his crucifixion. If Jesus was so overcome by gut-wrenching anguish, sweating drops of blood as he dreaded the horror of the cross,<sup>8</sup> then anxiety is not a sin. When I feel anxious, I can cling to my Father just as Jesus did, feeling no shame.

After all, Jesus didn't die to make us happy, did he? At least not in this mortal, fallen realm. Jesus died to redeem us from sin and secure our eternal home in heaven with him. In that place, we will lack nothing. We'll be freed from sin and suffering and know perfect peace and joy forevermore. Meanwhile, this side of heaven, we aren't going to be happy all the time. We aren't always going to feel strong, or even secure, in our faith.

In this broken world of ours, people get sick and injured, diligent workers lose jobs, abusive parents hurt children, and babies are born without life. Even beyond human tragedy and evil, nature itself groans under the curse of sin. Disease, floods, fires, and droughts devastate environments. The terrible winds of a hurricane or the invisible waves of a viral pandemic may bring entire nations to their knees.

We can't fully experience the joy of the Lord simply because we're not in heaven yet. Jesus himself warns us, "You will hear of wars and rumors of wars.... Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes... You will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus did not say, "You're gonna suffer, but you're gonna be happy about it."

That was Ron.

Jesus tells us to *expect* suffering. Yet God's joy remains real, even when we cannot feel it. It's like the sun on a rainy day: hidden behind the storm clouds of our hardship yet fiercely shining, faithful and bright. The tarnish of sin, the cobwebs of forgetfulness, and the shroud of pain may veil its brilliance, yet joy remains true. That is one reason I love the story of Naomi. Despite Naomi suffering tremendous loss and believing herself to be condemned to a lifetime of bitter grief, God was faithful to redeem her.

### Naomi's Suffering and Joy

AFTER A FAMINE forced Naomi and her family to abandon their home in Bethlehem, her husband died, leaving her and her sons alone in Moab. Then, tragically, her sons died too. Stricken with grief, Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth returned to Israel.

"Do not call me Naomi," the heartbroken widow told her friends. "Call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me."<sup>10</sup> Can you relate to Naomi here? God gives us some bitter chapters indeed. But those chapters are not the end; they are only the beginning. For Ruth loved Naomi, and Ruth loved God. While working in the fields to support herself and her mother-inlaw, Ruth met a rich and godly man named Boaz, who took pity on her. He fell in love with her and eventually married her. He took care of Naomi as well.

After Boaz married Ruth, Naomi's friends rejoiced and said to

her, "Blessed be the LORD, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him."<sup>11</sup>

And, indeed, Ruth had given birth to a little baby boy named Obed. Naomi was deeply involved in her grandson's life, caring for him as a nurse and surrogate mother. Obed doubtless brought her joy, made her laugh, and kept her very busy. And although Obed surely cheered Naomi's heart, are we to believe that she never missed her husband again? Are we meant to infer that she forgot her two dead sons?

Surely not.

Present joy doesn't erase yesterday's grief. Naomi's life was surely tinged with sorrow until the day she went to heaven. There, she would have seen her husband, her sons, and Jesus Christ—her redeemer—who would finally defeat death and sorrow for them all.

But there's more to Naomi's story. By giving Obed to Naomi as a grandson, God ultimately gave Jesus as a savior to Naomi, because Obed was an ancestor of Jesus. Just as her friends prophetically said, God did not leave Naomi without a redeemer. He provided a way. He was working his purpose out in defiance of her loss. He provided an inheritance of joy in both this life and the life to come.

When you and I experience grief and hardship, we can be certain that God will provide. Weeping may linger through the dark night of this world, but joy will come at the breaking of the dawn.<sup>12</sup> And although the blessings we enjoy in this life are sweet, they are merely a foreshadowing, a preview, a glimmer of the joy to come. They are like postcards sent from heaven—little pictures of our final destination and sweet reminders of a promise that God certainly will keep.

#### 14 Joy Is a Promise from God

The story of Naomi's redemption shines brilliantly against the backdrop of her suffering. As Martin Luther King, Jr., once said, "Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars."<sup>13</sup> The darker the night, the brighter the stars shine. Perhaps we couldn't rightly appreciate her faith and joy unless we knew of her sorrows. Perhaps we don't always perceive our own brightness simply because we are the stars. We shine radiantly against the void of this dying world, proving God's miraculous grace to all who witness it.

Is it remarkable if we love God while the sun is shining, the grass is green, the harvest is plentiful, and we are happy? Perhaps, but how much more meaningful is our love—and how much more secure may we feel in our own salvation—when our faith has endured *for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health,* and even beyond death? With love like this and faith that may flicker yet always rekindles, we can know with absolute certainty that God himself is in us. With his presence and the assurance that he is sustaining our faith comes a joy that blazes defiantly against the backdrop of any woe.

#### He Works All Things for Our Good

ONE SUNDAY AS we were leaving church, Jason and I were struggling to round up our daughters, who were giggling, squealing like teapots, and skipping around the sanctuary. I was anxious that they might bother someone. I didn't want another adult to correct them or for me to be thought of as a failure of a mother. With every outburst, my anxiety rose.

But then something unexpected happened.

"You have the happiest children I've ever seen," an elderly man said.

The compliment stunned me. As my tension lifted, something

else surprised me too: I became aware of the presence of joy. It rippled through the air in the laughter of my children. It sparkled in their eyes. It tumbled and danced around their feet between the pews.

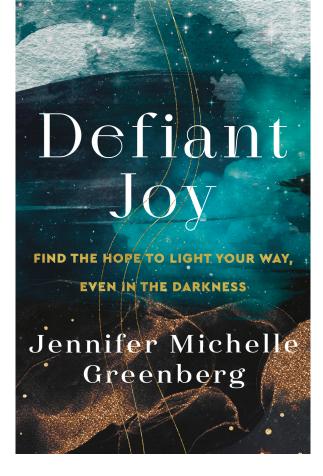
My greatest fear as a parent had always been that my own trauma would somehow impede my children's happiness. I feared I was too damaged, that I didn't know what I was doing, and that I could have negative behavioral patterns I wasn't even aware of. More than anything, I wanted my kids to be safe, but I also wanted them to feel loved, believed in, and understood. I wanted to preserve their innocence for as long as possible.

In that sanctuary, my perspective shifted from fear to hope. As I watched my children tussle like puppies, I caught my first glimpse of real joy. It was perfect. It was pure. It was a flicker of heaven.

God had done this.

He'd taken me—a broken, flawed, and confused soul—and given my kids happy childhoods. How could I ask for anything more? As I watched them twirl in their Sunday dresses and play hide-and-seek beneath the altar, I realized I had never understood joy. Joy was something high above me. It was something supernatural and holy. Suddenly I realized that all my attempts to "think positively" and "be happy" were cheap and flimsy imitations of an inexplicable gift.

I began to understand that, regardless of what I'd been taught at church and home, joy wasn't something I could generate myself. It wasn't the result of doing all the right things or thinking positively. It wasn't a reward for good behavior or something I could buy. Forcing joy into my heart was about as realistic as trying to lasso the moon. Joy wasn't mine to make, earn, capture, or give; it was a gift I could receive only from the God of joy.



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