

LIVING
JOYFULLY
in
Marriage

REFLECTING THE
RELATIONSHIP *of*
CHRIST *and the*
Church

STEVEN KEY



REFORMED
FREE PUBLISHING
ASSOCIATION
Jenison, Michigan

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All Bible quotations are taken from the King James [Authorized] Version

Reformed Free Publishing Association

1894 Georgetown Center Drive

Jenison MI 49428

616-457-5970

www.rfpa.org

mail@rfpa.org

Cover design by Erika Kiel

Interior design by Katherine Lloyd / theDESKonline.com

ISBN: 978-1-944555-95-5

ISBN: 978-1-944555-96-2 (ebook)

LCCN: 2021948289

*To my wife, Nancy, with whom
I have been blessed by God
to live joyfully in marriage since 1976.*

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INTRODUCTION

This book has its roots with encouragement by the elders of Loveland Protestant Reformed Church and some of the members of the congregation, where the contents of this book were first presented in a series of sermons in 2015. This material is important not only for married couples—because then many people would be excluded—but for everyone.

Premarital counseling has been tremendously beneficial toward establishing strong, healthy marriages in Christ's church. But not everyone has had that benefit when establishing their marriages. In addition, premarital counseling is not a cure-all. As I emphasize in those counseling sessions, if you are not going to lay hold by faith and to apply the instruction of God's word to your marriage, you are not going to enjoy God's blessing in your marriage. If your marriage is suffering, don't point the finger at your spouse, but look deeply at yourself in the light of God's word.

There is clearly a need for the strengthening of our marriages, so that we might live rightly and joyfully in, and not defile, the glorious relationship that is to reflect Christ and the church. In some cases, it may be necessary that we not perpetuate but forsake the sins we observed in our homes growing up. In other cases, we must repent of a very selfish and improper view of marriage. But in all cases, we must devote ourselves to being *doers* of the word, not just hearers.

Marriage problems are as old as the fall into sin by the first married couple, Adam and Eve. But we live in a period of history where the assaults upon marriage are unrelenting. Because of marriage's

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critical importance to the church, and because of what it stands for and represents, namely, the glorious relationship between Christ and his church, no institution is under such open and fierce and relentless attack in our day as the institution of marriage.

There is a war tactic called “saturation bombardment” when every means is used to bomb the enemy relentlessly until he collapses. To those who reject God’s truth *we* are the enemy. And in our day they are using every means—including all the media, especially television and all that is accessible via the internet, political processes, and more—to undermine what the Bible calls *holy* marriage.

That began already in the early years of television, what some refer to as the “years of innocence,” when husbands began to be portrayed as incompetent buffoons and women were the ones who really ran the household. But sin develops.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s showed the astounding speed of the development of sin, a speed that only continues to increase at an explosive rate, as if mankind would see marriage dissolved in a giant sonic boom.

Sexual purity or chastity within the holy bond of marriage is rejected openly. Unmarried men and women shaking their fists at God and living together without shame is common today and accepted by society at large. We are told by the media and by politicians and social leaders and psychologists and others that sexual activity outside of marriage—which belongs to what the Bible calls the *sin* of fornication—is a part of growing up today and should be promoted, but with certain safety precautions.

Adultery is such a common phenomenon today that people in the public eye no longer have to pay a price of shame, let alone removal from office, for such violation of God’s law. The sanctity of marriage and its permanence is ridiculed, with easy divorce and remarriage being advocated as the solution to marriage problems.

So astounding has been sin’s development that there is a

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widespread cry today to attempt to *redefine* marriage, as permitting same-sex couples—a redefinition now established by the courts and by our institutions of government.

When it comes to God's ordinance that a man and wife bring forth children, the world levels its vicious attack against God's people who would bring forth large families while at the same time giving approval to the mass murder of unborn children, slaying millions in the United States alone with abortion on demand. In this way also the ungodly would turn us against that which God has ordained and the way in which he is pleased to bring forth his church.

Then there is the more underlying factor that views even relationships from a perspective of self-seeking and pleasure. "What's the benefit to me?"

The spiritual attacks are intense!

Sadly, the church has already succumbed to these attacks of Satan from many perspectives.

This is not even to take into account our own sinfulness and our own personal attacks upon this holy relationship by our mistreatment of our spouses, our sinful behavior within this relationship, our frequent departures from the Bible's instruction, in which we attack *our own happiness*. Our own marriages are at stake! That is evident by the number of marriages in the church that are not what they *must* be before God.

And while the church is called to receive with open arms those who are led by God to repent of such sins, and while Paul writes, "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11), the fact remains, it is for these reasons—and we could mention many others—that we need to know God's word concerning marriage and the family, and in obedience to God live as he would have us live.

To that end, the instruction we turn to in God's word is intended

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to remind us how marriage is to be *lived*.

It is not my intention to repeat the foundational series that Prof. David Engelsma preached years ago in Loveland at a time when marriage problems were also evident, which sermons were published in the book *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church*.¹ Although I highly recommend this book, my approach is going to be different. While beginning with the divine institution of marriage, and not overlooking the foundational truths of the role of a husband, the role of a wife, and so on, I intend to focus on what it is to live joyfully in marriage.

In outlining that main theme and selecting texts, I have divided the book into three main sections. The first sub-section of my main theme will be what I am calling “Essentials to Joyful Marriage.” That will be followed by four chapters under another sub-section entitled “Privileged to Make It Work.” Then will follow several chapters under the final sub-section, “Dedicated to Expressing the Joy,” or what might also be referred to as “Bringing Christ’s Life to Expression in Marriage.”

Summarized: I want you to understand what marriage is and what it requires for those who are redeemed by Christ’s precious blood. What God has taught us is what is *best* for us and for our joy in the fellowship of his love.

Because this book is going to deal much with relationships, I trust it will be beneficial in ways that apply to more than just the marriage relationship.

Not to be overlooked in this book is the glory of single life. Single life is not a curse, and it is not a disease. It must be viewed as a glorious calling for some. In addition, because we are members of one body, it is important that our single members—even those who

¹ David J. Engelsma, *Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church* (Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2014).

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have been bereaved and those who have been forsaken by a spouse, as well as our unmarried young adults and young people—have a *biblical* understanding of marriage.

We all must uphold that divine institution, no matter our personal situation in life. But especially for the sake of our children, our marriages must reflect the relationship between Christ and the church. God would have us live joyfully in marriage, that our children might understand from that example that the Christian life in fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ is a life of joy, in which we delight in the intimacy of fellowship with God. That, after all, alone can provide our children the stability that they need for a life of joy in God's covenant.

I want you to see that also single life is lived in the midst of Christ's church as belonging to *the* marriage of the church to Christ. After all, when God instituted marriage to reflect his great love for us in Christ Jesus, he not only taught us *what* marriage must be, but he made marriage a help to our understanding of the gospel and to our own place in relationship to Christ.

In addition, we must remember that the chief enemy of marriage, also *our* enemy as members of Christ's bride, is that of sinful self-centeredness, or pride. That is why, when we speak about living joyfully in marriage and consider many of the biblical teachings concerning relationships, which teachings are essential to healthy, joyful marriages, we are standing before truths that apply also to all healthy relationships within the bride of Christ.

So besides growing in our understanding of marriage, we will benefit from God's word pertaining to our relationship to Christ and to one another. Whether as husband or wife, or in the higher calling as partakers of the marriage between Christ and his church, I would have you maintain and enjoy this relationship, as redeemed and sanctified and brought under the dominion of Christ and his word.

But I also remind you of the words of James 1:22. The Christian,

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in hearing the word of God, does not just say, “Nice word; we need to hear that,” and continue to walk his or her own way. If so, that person’s Christianity is self-deception, James bluntly tells us. We must be *doers* of the word. When you hear what God says concerning marriage, then by God’s grace and the work of his Spirit in your heart, you put to practice what you hear and glorify your Redeemer who has taken you as his bride.

Steven R. Key



Part I

*Essentials to
Joyful Marriage*

Chapter 1

THE ESSENCE OF JOY: MARRIAGE TO CHRIST

3. That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.
4. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.—1 John 1:3–4

I have entitled this first section of the book “Essentials to Joyful Marriage.” That is the expression that came to mind because the recognition of these truths and living in the consciousness of these truths is necessary for holding any marriage together and for keeping the bands of joy attached to that marriage.

The first thing necessary for a book entitled *Living Joyfully in Marriage* is to consider the meaning of joy. After all, which couple upon getting married does not want a joy-filled marriage? But the idea of joy in marriage is often defined by a very selfish perspective. What can I get out of this relationship? In what way will this fulfill me? Joy is mistakenly viewed in terms of getting what I want. Such a view will inevitably leave one disappointed and disillusioned. So we must establish from the very beginning that joy in marriage is not a personal happiness found in self-fulfillment. It is something far deeper and profoundly beautiful.

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Galatians 5:22 identifies the second manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit as *joy*. What a blessing to be partakers of that fruit, to live as Christians in the joy that is ours in Christ Jesus! Joy is ours—as we learn especially from John’s first epistle—as we live in the fellowship of our Redeemer. So the fruit of the Spirit is fruit that we enjoy and that we bear *in Christ* and in the consciousness of our marriage to him. We need to be aware of the wonder of our union with Christ. We need to be reminded of that truth constantly.

Our great adversary, Satan, and those whom he has deceived are doing everything possible to bring ruin to God’s cause. He can never do so successfully. Christ is already victorious. At the cross and especially by his resurrection from the dead, Christ conquered the prince of this world. But that defeated devil continues to thrash around, asserting himself in the vain attempt to devour Christ’s bride, the church. He does so especially by attempting to disrupt our fellowship with God and to defile our relationship as those married to Christ. Increasingly in our day the unbelieving world shows its hatred toward Christ and his church. Belonging to that hatred are the attacks upon marriage as the reflection of the relationship between Christ and his bride. Our lives as Christians are influenced by and affected by those attacks. Some succumb to them.

The Holy Spirit through the inspired apostle John sets before us the beautiful balance of the Christian life as it comes to expression in this fallen world. Living in fellowship with God, we walk with a spiritual focus and therefore show ourselves spiritually separate, children of the light living in the midst of darkness. In spite of the dangers and in spite of the sinfulness of our own natures against which we battle constantly, we have life eternal, fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. This truth, a matter of our own experience by the Spirit’s work, is the source of triumphant joy. So John writes.

After having introduced his epistle by pointing us to the Christ in whom is life eternal, and therefore to the blessedness of the

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covenantal life that is fellowship with God, the inspired apostle says, “And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full” (1 John 1:4). His desire is that these believers to whom he writes—and the Spirit has preserved this for us—might have fullness of joy, even though we live in a world full of difficulties, trials, and sorrows. The apostle John testified of the gospel of our fellowship with God and with his Son Jesus Christ. Without using the specific language, he testified of our marriage to Christ. He did so with the express purpose that your joy may be full. He could not have written these words without remembering the words of the Lord Jesus that he had recorded in his gospel account: “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full” (John 15:11). Christ has spoken to us that his joy might remain in us, and our joy might be full. But what is meant by that reference to joy?

Joy

When you take into account the words of Jesus in John 15:11 and look more closely at 1 John 1:3–4, you must realize that joy belongs to the very essence of the Christian life. The Christian has joy. It might be obscured, and often is. We look for the fullness of it. But that joy is ours in Christ Jesus. It belongs to the very essence of Christianity, to our marriage union with Christ.

It is noteworthy that as John wrote these words he was standing on the threshold of his last agony. Humanly speaking, we would say that it was hardly a time for great joy for the apostle. He was a very aged saint. As we age, we long more and more for heaven. We don't know what afflictions the apostle bore as the marks of his old age, but we know that with age comes affliction, the breakdown of the body. We experience it. Married couples also realize that their earthly relationship is soon to come to its end. We attend a wedding, the beginning of a marriage in the Lord, and would describe that

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event with the adjective *joyful*. It is a time of joy. That term does not generally come to mind when we stand before the divine parting of the marriage relationship in death.

We also know that John was laboring at a time when the church was under fierce attack. He refers to that in his letter. As pastors always bear the brunt of being on the foreground in such attacks, being most aware of them and most distracted by them, we would not think of John at such a moment in his life as being characterized by great joy. But he meets what conflicts and trials and afflictions he must bear with a joy that he must convey to Christ's church. The fullness of joy that he experiences, he would have you experience.

This text therefore stands as a stark reminder that as Christians our focus is out of place when we persist in a chronic state of melancholy or despair. You realize, I trust, even before we get to a positive treatment of what this joy is, that this joy is not simply something superficial, nor does it eliminate the reality of sorrow and tears. There is a time to weep, as we are told in Ecclesiastes 3:4. There is a time for the Christian even to be cast into sorrow. I speak not merely of the *natural* sorrow that is the result of death, the death of a spouse or a child for example. Such sorrow is an expression of *love*—although we must be careful that it is not the sorrow of despair. But the child of God may be and ought to be cast into deep sorrow over his or her falls into sin. “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of,” as we read in 2 Corinthians 7:10, “but the sorrow of the world worketh death.” When we fall into sin, and God so works to open our eyes and see his holiness, there is a time for holy despair, godly sorrow. When Scripture calls us to “Rejoice evermore,” as we read in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, or “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice” (Phil. 4:4), that does not mean there is no place for sorrow or tears. There is. But what the text reveals is that the Christian life may not be characterized by chronic despair and gloom.

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Now this is where the background of the text is so vitally important. This entire epistle takes into account the dreadful difficulty of living in such a world as is in the bondage of death. When we, as Christians, understand the biblical perspective of things, then we have a realistic perspective of life in this world. Nor do we merely look on the surface of things, but we dig deeper, looking at the core, at the foundation of what we readily observe. We see death as the wages of sin. We understand that this world isn't getting better, nor may we expect it to get better. The development of sin that we observe, even the apostasy that marks the church and grows like a cancer, is evidence of the wrath of God revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. We live in an evil world; and the temptations increase, also when it comes to upholding the sanctity of marriage. Moreover, we often stumble and fall. There are many sorrows. The same was true among those to whom John wrote. It is true for you and me.

But with what God has revealed to us by his gospel, we have no right to a sense of hopelessness and despair. In fact, to live that way is sin, a rejection of the precious promises of God and the testimony of his faithfulness. There are always those in the church who need to examine themselves in this connection. Always complaining, living in bitterness toward God, maybe even toward a husband or a wife, they seem to enjoy misery. But the apostle Paul, who wrote, "O wretched man that I am" (Rom. 7:24), also wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice" (Phil. 4:4). One of the manifestations of the fruit of the Spirit is joy. Where that is cast aside, there is a grieving of the Holy Spirit. This is because we so quickly take our focus off the Lord Christ and the wonder of grace and put it on ourselves. We turn our thoughts inward and become self-centered. We rob ourselves of the joy that ought to be our experience. Joy belongs to the Christian life because joy honors God. Therefore, we ought never give the impression that to be a Christian is an unhappy thing.

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That being said, what *is* this joy?

Again, before looking at it positively, let's understand that this joy is not an attitude of flippancy, a cheap rosy outlook that is instilled by some self-pep talk. Nor is this joy some sudden outburst of emotion, rising up upon a surprise that prospers and makes happy, but soon to subside into a cold indifference. Of such the wise preacher wrote in Ecclesiastes 7:6, when he said, "As the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool." Sadly, that is the only type of joy the world will ever know.

When we talk about marriage, we need to realize that there is no real joy except as a fruit of the Spirit, from life in Christ. While the world might show a certain expression of happiness or joy, we must not fall into the mistake of thinking that their pleasures and their pleasantries are an expression of true joy. They aren't. The Bible acknowledges that there are pleasures to be found even in the way of sin. Those pleasures are not the seeds of joy, but of deepest sorrow. Those pleasures of sin are only for a season and result in death. This joy of which the apostle speaks isn't even dependent upon outward circumstances. Nor is this joy some superficial religious lightheartedness.

This joy is an expression of living in fellowship with God. It is an act of love that flows out of love for God, that first manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit. The fellowship with God that is ours by the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts arises out of a true knowledge of God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Joy is an expression of our marriage to Christ and the knowledge of God's love for us in Christ. It is the knowledge of faith that we, of all people, have been given by God and taken by Christ as his bride. It is eternal life in the bonds of his covenantal embrace.

Because God has also taken his entire church in Christ into his own covenantal life of fellowship and love, we have fellowship not only with God, but with his people. Life in the covenant, the consciousness of God's fellowship in Jesus Christ, the fervent love for

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him that arises out of this wonder work of his grace in us by his Holy Spirit, instills in us the joy that Christ himself enjoys and that is ours by virtue of our union with him.

This joy, therefore, has several elements.

First, joy is a state of recognizing that we live in the fellowship of God's love for us in Christ. That means that a husband and wife must be able to make this confession together! As one flesh, they must be able to confess together, he is the God of our salvation! That's the heart of joy in marriage. The same is true of every person who is united to Christ by faith, a member of his bride. Joy is found in confessing from the heart, he is the God of my salvation! That is the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and minds by faith in Christ Jesus. In his Son God has revealed himself as Jehovah-salvation, who is unchangeably faithful in his love and tender mercy. Think of how many married couples you know who have faced great trials, even tragedies, or serious afflictions. In marriage you face those trials together, as two who are one. But you face them knowing the Lord's presence.

Whatever our circumstances in life, however great our troubles and sorrows, no matter how dark is the hour, he never forsakes us. Indeed, when everything appears to be against us, he is working for us, saving us, even through our afflictions. Not only has he told us so, but he has proven it through all ages in his dealings with his people and in our own lives in his dealings with us. And when we, who are miserable sinners, look upon this great God and see his love for us in Christ, we rejoice in him and in the fellowship of his love.

Second, let us remember, as Jesus taught us in John 15:26, the Spirit always testifies of Christ. This joy, therefore, because it finds its focus in Christ, is the knowledge and expression of victorious jubilation. This stands inseparably related to the first element of this joy, namely, that of recognizing that we live in the fellowship of God's love for us in Christ.

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When I speak of joy in terms of victorious jubilation, it ought to be evident that this joy does not have its foundation in ourselves, in our life, in outward things, in a righteousness that is of the law. Marriage, after all, is marred by sin, something that we will consider throughout the chapters that follow. For our marriages to reflect the mystery of Christ and the church, we are called to the hard work of obedience to God's perfect instruction concerning our callings in every aspect of marriage. That calling, that labor, continues for our entire earthly sojourn. It continues until we are taken to heaven. If joy was to be established upon how well we live and how good we have been in our marriages, our joy would soon be consumed by the overwhelming reality of sin.

But when your focus is on God's great gift to you, when your focus is on Christ and the shedding of his blood, the pouring out of his life, the satisfaction of God's justice in your place and on your behalf; when you see that it was your righteousness that was sealed by his resurrection from the dead, so that your sins are blotted out and your adoption into God's family is sure, that he has poured out his Spirit upon you, that you of all people are a member of Christ's bride, then your joy is an expression of victorious exultation. It is the expression of thankfulness that cannot be held back. Rejoicing in him, you sing with gladness of heart that your names are written in heaven! That is exactly what the apostle Peter says when, pointing us to Christ, he says in 1 Peter 1:8, "Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." With a focus upon God and his Christ, we are marked by victorious jubilation. Joy unspeakable and full of glory! What a blessed fruit of the Spirit!

Third, when considering the elements of this joy, we find that belonging to this joy is a spiritual strength. On the observance of the feast of tabernacles after the return from the captivity, we find that God's law was proclaimed to the spiritual understanding of God's

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people. We read about it in Nehemiah 8. When the people of God saw themselves in the light of God's law, they were overwhelmed by the deep sense of their own guilt and sinfulness. We read, in fact, that the people broke down and wept "when they heard the words of the law" (v. 9). But Ezra pointed the people to their Messiah, commanding them to partake of the feast that the Lord had prepared them, "Neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (v. 10). From the sorrow for their own guilt and sin, they were to look to Jehovah, their Savior—"for the joy of the LORD is your strength." Where would we be, if not for that?

In Psalm 5:11–12, the call is proclaimed, "But let all those that put their trust in thee rejoice: let them ever shout for joy, because thou defendest them: let them also that love thy name be joyful in thee. For thou, LORD, wilt bless the righteous; with favour wilt thou compass him as with a shield." There is nothing superficial about this joy. In this joy of the Lord, there is strength. When you are joyful, you are carried by a dynamic power, ready to meet every trial without losing hope, including every trial in married life. That is the Holy Spirit's work in you!

Fourth, this joy is an act of the will, for throughout Scripture we are called to rejoice. We must exercise ourselves in this act of rejoicing, keeping a proper spiritual focus with our eyes upon our heavenly Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. When we call attention to this particular element of the Christian's joy, we do not overlook nor minimize the fact, as with every aspect of our sanctification, that "it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). But "rejoice evermore" is the calling of the Christian. Key to this exercise of the will is the calling of Philippians 4:6–7, "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

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You understand, therefore, that the joy of which John writes is something very deep and profound. It affects the way we think and our approach to all of life. It affects our perspective of marriage as well, understanding that marriage reflects the relationship between Christ and his bride. This is the joy that comes from drawing water out of the wells of salvation, to use the language of Isaiah 12:3. In other words, it comes down to this: joy, as the fruit of the Spirit, is the response of the soul to a knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ and the intimacy of our fellowship with him, our marriage to him.

The Fullness of This Joy

First John 1:4 calls our attention to the fact that this joy is to be *full* in us. What is the idea expressed in that desire that your joy be full?

The expression implies that we possess this joy in a measure. To know Christ, to be a partaker of his life, is to possess joy. We might easily get the impression from the text that the implication is, further, that while we have this joy, it is not yet full. We have it only in a small measure. But while that can sometimes be true, that is not the emphasis here. The tense of the verb used in the text speaks of a fullness that is already our possession. The idea is actually this: “These things write we unto you, that your joy may *remain full*.” Not that it may be, or become, but that it may *remain* full.

Many things in our lives and many events we face would cause us to take our eyes off the source of our joy. Marriage, with all its activities and all its responsibilities, can distract us from the necessary nurture of our spiritual life with Christ. Our weak, sinful flesh is susceptible to losing spiritual focus and therefore detracting from the joy that is ours in Christ. There is a reason why the apostle Paul wrote:

32. But I would have you without carefulness. He that is unmarried careth for the things that belong to the Lord, how he may please the Lord:

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33. But he that is married careth for the things that are of the world, how he may please his wife.
34. There is a difference also between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman careth for the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit: but she that is married careth for the things of the world, how she may please her husband. (1 Cor. 7:32–34)

Those who are not married certainly have their own distractions. But marriage and family life can very easily distract us from our chief relationship, the marriage to Christ that is the source of all joy.

If we set aside for a moment the stark reality of our own sinfulness and look simply at the weakness of our human nature, we can look at Jesus for an example here. His whole earthly sojourn was filled with tormenting trials of his joy. Think of what it was like for him to look around in his family and see his own family members rejecting him. How many of us don't experience trials in our families, even in rejection of the truth or departures from the faith? And what grievous sin tears at the joy that ought to mark a Christian home! Jesus experienced the same in a way that you and I cannot even imagine, because he knew that he himself would bear the agonies of hell for his own loved ones. The Bible speaks of the sorrows that he bore in the contradiction of sinners against himself. We are told also of the exhaustion of his nature, a weariness that would almost compel him to say, "I can't go on!"

We could multiply examples of those things Jesus faced in his human nature that—though he was without sin, yet in the weakness of his human nature—would rob him of the fullness of joy. Yet we read that in one particularly dark hour, when he was facing the rejection of multitudes, "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit" (Luke 10:21). We ask with amazement, "How is that possible?" But the answer is revealed in the rest of that text: "In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth,

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that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes: even so, Father; for so it seemed good in thy sight.” You see? The joy of the Lord is his strength. Christ looks to his heavenly Father, being perfectly subject to his will, and says, “Thou art good! Thou doest all things in perfect wisdom.” That was his strength; that was his joy. He placed his focus on God, who does that which is good in his sight. And what God does is good and right—because it is for the salvation of his church.

But Christ possessed the fullness of joy because he was emptied of self, to seek his Father and his Father’s will. How necessary this is in marriage! We are so full of self, so self-centered. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant” (Phil. 2:5–7). “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). Setting aside our worship of self, to seek our Father and Father’s will, to live out of the knowledge of our faith union with Christ, is the way in which we rejoice—not only in God’s fellowship, but in our fellowship with one another, also as husbands and wives.

John’s desire is that your joy may remain full. You who are Christ’s possess the joy of covenantal fellowship with God, adoption into his family with all the riches that his family life entails. But we tend to wander. We tend to lose focus; we tend to take our eyes off our Father and get all caught up in ourselves. Especially when we face trials of life and we focus our thoughts inward and it all becomes a matter of self and my troubles and my sorrows—me, me, me—the joy of fellowship with Christ is sucked right out of our life. We find ourselves miserable. That’s what self-centeredness does. No true joy is or can be selfish. We need to be taken out of our narrow focus on self, out of the bondage and unbearable burden of our self-pity and self-inflicted loss of joy, and taken into Christ and into the

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loving fellowship of our heavenly Father, who would have us cast our burdens upon him.

To that end we have *Christ* set before us! To that end the gospel, good news, is declared—God having mercy upon us. He sees our needs every day and gives us one day a week in the office of the Great Physician, that in his house on the Lord's day, under the preaching of his word, we might be renewed in strength, even called to repentance, and restored to the fullness of joy. That is the significance also of Jesus' words in John 15:11: "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full." Nor is this something only for heaven. It is evident that John is speaking of something that is and must be a present reality. For the life that we live as the children of God is a life that must reflect the life of Christ, in whom is fullness of joy.

The Source of This Joy

John 15:11 also points us to the source of this joy. Christ himself and his work for us and word to us is the source of this fullness of joy. To put it another way: the source of joy is our fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ, by the work of the Holy Spirit. The fullness of joy comes in that measure of the knowledge of Christ by faith. In him, who is our life by his Spirit, is our fellowship with the Father and with all those who are his, including that spouse to whom I am married.

Here again is that which sets apart the Christian faith and life from every other teaching or religion. Our faith and life is that of a glorious relationship with God, fellowship in his covenantal life through Jesus Christ and by the work of the Holy Spirit. As the doctrine of election is the heart of the church, and the truth of the cross is the heart of the gospel, so a proper understanding of God's covenant is the heart of all true religion. And the only way into that relationship of covenantal fellowship with God is through Christ.

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He is the beginning and the end. There is no true joy apart from him. In him we have life. Through him and by his Spirit alone we have access unto God. That is why, if we are to live in the fullness of joy, also in marriage, our spiritual life must be strong. We must continually see to the nurture and strength of our spiritual lives and “grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

Christ himself ministers this fullness of joy to us also in our marriages through the preaching of his word applied by the Holy Spirit. So he nourishes and cherishes us, sanctifying and cleansing us (Eph. 5:26–29). Joy, after all, is a matter of the *conscious possession* of eternal life. That is given us by the Holy Spirit through the gospel. “These things write we unto you,” says John (1 John 1:4). The *we* refers to the apostles, who wrote these things under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is the word of God. This is the word that by the gospel is preached unto you. Let us understand then, not the Bible itself, not even the preaching of the word in itself, but the word of Christ used under the powerful influence of the Spirit of Christ is the cause of our joy. By the work of the Spirit through the word, we confess with Jeremiah in Jeremiah 15:16, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by thy name, O LORD God of hosts.” Notice that. By the word we receive the joy and rejoicing of knowing that we are called by the name of Jehovah God of hosts! We live in the fellowship of his love, and nothing can separate us from that love.

We bear in our lives the fruit of the Spirit! What a blessing! The Lord knows that we are flesh. He knows that our joy is often lacking, and sometimes even missing. Sometimes it is lacking because we are looking in the wrong place for that joy. Lot looked for it in the opportunities of Sodom; Samson looked for it in Delilah; Solomon in all kinds of women; the rich fool in his possessions. Some young

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people look for their joy in “good times” and even in the pleasures of sin that are for a season. Some look for joy in relationships, sometimes even in relationships that break fellowship with God. And God knows that a lack of watchfulness and prayer in our lives leaves us susceptible to a grievous fall into sin where there is such a loss of fellowship with God that we sense no joy.

So the Lord gives us his gospel. “And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full” (1 John 1:4). As the Spirit gives us to see that in the midst of this darkness we have light in the Lord Jesus, he also produces in us and sustains in us the true and lasting joy of the Christian life. The same is true for marriage. Truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. What greater joy can there be? Many might be the difficulties of our lives, heavy the burdens and sorrows. But Christ is the same, and his joy is the same. And in him you are kept, “whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see him not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8).