

Friendship, Fellowship,
and Joy

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This booklet was created from a message preached by Pastor Stevens.

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the King James Version. Italics for emphasis are ours.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 5

Chapter 1 7

FRIENDSHIP

Chapter 2 10

FELLOWSHIP

Chapter 3 14

JOY

CONCLUSION 18

INTRODUCTION

True love, true friendship, true joy: My thoughts have been on these things lately.

I recall a very tender letter I received one Christmas season from a little girl in Massachusetts. She was seven years old at the time. It was December, and her dad had died in October. "This is the first Christmas that I will have without my daddy," she wrote. "Please pray for me and for my mother."

Letters such as this one break my heart.

Another letter I remember involved a precious wife who was having much difficulty in her family. As a child, she had been abused in many ways. She married the first man who showed her any attention, but he became a drunkard. He would yell at her, and at times he was physically abusive. Her son grew up and became like his daddy. He, too, cursed his mother. Then, she came to church. An outreach team had visited her neighborhood and she re-

sponded. "I have found a haven," she wrote of our church. "The love I get from you people is what keeps me going."

Another heartbreaking situation was with a boy in our high school. He struggled with class work and found it hard to concentrate. His parents railed against him. They pushed and pushed, and he became very discouraged. He felt worthless. He could not see his value as a person. That was a boy headed for deep trouble. Fortunately, as we met together in my office, he found a place of rest. He received God's love and responded to God's thoughts about him. Eventually his parents came around, and he is doing marvelously today.

I think you understand that this world we are living in is filled with all kinds of difficult situations. These troubles exist across the nation and around the world. People desire to belong somewhere. They are weary and frustrated in their loneliness, and the sense of separation wears on their hearts.

The world needs true friends, true fellowship, and true joy. This booklet is written to reveal this, and to show that the answer to every need is in Christ.

Chapter One

FRIENDSHIP

“A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother” (Proverbs 18:24).

A real friend’s pure interest is in meeting the needs of others. I may have many acquaintances, but my friends are those who give something without asking for anything in return.

In examining the Hebrew text of Proverbs 18:24, we find an interesting word that is translated as “friendly.” Some have taken the Hebrew definition of that word to mean that a man of many friends must be a compromiser, which will show him to be a bad friend who will eventually come to ruin.

However, when we look carefully at the text, we see an interesting bit of wordplay here in the Hebrew. A man who has friends—*ra’ah*—must show himself friendly—*ra’a*. The ‘h’ falls off the second word and this word speaks of losing

something and being broken in some way. The tense structure indicates a form of the verb that shows causative and reflexive action.

Making ourselves available to be a friend will cost us something. We may lose a piece of ourselves, much in the same way the first word loses a piece of itself in the text. Jesus Christ, the Friend who sticks closer than a brother, was very broken for us. He was wounded for our transgressions and bruised for our iniquities (Isaiah 53:5).

Face it. Having friends means taking risks; it means going out on a limb. Vulnerability is part of the equation. Jesus risked rejection because He so loved the world.

The Unspeakable Gift

Proverbs 17:17 says that a friend loves at all times, and, like a brother, a friend is born for adversity. That should be the way things are between a husband and his wife. The wife loves at all times and she is born for her husband's adversity. The husband loves at all times, and he is born for his wife's adversity.

The Pharisees labeled Jesus as the "friend of publicans and sinners" (Luke 7:34). He was called the friend of Abraham (Isaiah 41:8). He

spoke to Moses as a friend (Exodus 33:11). Yet, He was called the friend of publicans and sinners.

Christ had a deep, motivating, constraining interest in His heart to meet people's needs. He was only interested in meeting the need; He was not interested in getting anything in return.

That is true friendship. What an unspeakable gift! Thank God for it! Words cannot fully explain what God has done for us. His gift toward us is indescribable, inexpressible, and unutterable.

It is impossible to express what that means to me—to be saved forever, to know that I am seated in heavenly places with Him, to realize that I am a new creation and that I am hid with Christ in God. This is the gift of eternal life, and that life abides in me. That goes for everyone who has received Christ as his Savior.

The principle we must realize is that God loves us. We love Him because He first loved us (1 John 4:19). He made the initiation, and we responded. And now, in receiving His love, we discover how precious we are to Him.

Chapter Two

FELLOWSHIP

“Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.

“As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love.

“If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love.

“These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full.

“This is my commandment, That ye love one another, as I have loved you” (John 15:8-12).

“Then one of them, which was a lawyer, asked him a question, tempting him, and saying,

“Master, which is the great commandment in the law?

“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind.

“This is the first and great commandment.

“And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matthew 22:35-40).

Loving others is really made so much more complicated than what is revealed in the Scriptures. It really is a very simple process. I love others as Christ has loved me. Many people try to do things in the name of loving others, but they get out of order. I can only love my neighbor as I love myself. And I can only love myself as I recognize the love of God toward me.

Every day I need to think about how much God loves me. I need to see myself as being hid with Christ in God every moment of every day. Having this concept rooted deep in my heart, I have a capacity to love others without any expectations.

This is true friendship that comes from having fellowship with God.

A Partnership in Truth

We are partakers, or partners, in a heavenly calling. We bring all that God has invested in us to the table of grace. There we share what God has given each of us.

One woman in our city went through a terrible stretch. Her mother died of cancer and then her father was killed in a car accident. We were knocking on doors, sharing the Gospel, when we met her. This lady opened her home and spilled out her grief.

That was fellowship in suffering. We wept as this woman wept. She was drawn to come to our church because we were able to meet her where she lived—both geographically and emotionally.

When we go soul winning and in our richest times of fellowship, we share the unspeakable gift. We share our thoughts on what is, in reality, indescribable. Maybe the reason we talk so much about Jesus Christ is that we are still trying to find the right combination of words. I believe this exercise will go on throughout eternity.

Words of life, words of truth, words of triumph, words of comfort. We give these out as God gives them to us. We speak as we are spoken to by the Holy Spirit. Our fellowship is holy, and it is centered on the high thoughts that God has of us. We do not compromise by taking the promises of God and referring to them in common ways. The word for that is profanity; it is allowing truth fall in the street (Isaiah 59:14).

There are just so many people out there who do not understand God's unspeakable gift. They cannot comprehend true friendship that loves at all times and is born for adversity. When this kind of fellowship exists among us, people notice. This is the promise of Jesus Christ, who said that our love for one another will reveal that we have been with Him and that we are His disciples (John 13:35).

Every day I hear things about people's lives that are so hard to imagine. I was unaware of what these people have gone through, and I begin to pray as I have never prayed before. I cared for them, but I did not realize the deep needs that existed in their hearts.

Many years ago, God laid upon my heart His desire to love others through me. Through the Word and the Holy Spirit, He said, "Don't even get into the ministry unless you are going to commit yourself to Me and to fellowshiping in the sufferings and joys of others."

God has done it. He has shed His love abroad in my heart (Romans 5:5), and that has made all the difference.

Chapter Three

JOY

“The LORD is the portion of mine inheritance and of my cup: thou maintainest my lot.

“The lines are fallen unto me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage.

“I will bless the LORD, who hath given me counsel: my reins also instruct me in the night seasons.

“I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved.

“Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope.

“For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

“Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures for evermore” (Psalm 16:5-11).

Jesus Christ came to bring us joy. Happiness

can change with our circumstances, but joy remains. It stands upon the promises of God. In His presence, we have fullness of joy—an exceeding, abundant, inexhaustible joy.

This tells me that I don't have to be depressed with circumstances because I am always in God's presence. I don't have to talk negatively on the phone because God's presence is with me. Heat? I am in the presence of God, and I don't even see it or feel it when it comes (Jeremiah 17:8). I don't have to react to people who don't understand. Instead, I can ask God to bless them. I give them God's love because of God's presence.

“Then he said unto them, Go your way, eat the fat, and drink the sweet, and send portions unto them for whom nothing is prepared: for this day is holy unto our Lord: neither be ye sorry; for the joy of the LORD is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

God has given us a great instruction book: the Bible. Its pages show us how everything works together for divine good in the purpose and plan of God.

I remember some Christmas times when I had to put toys together before the morning would come. Some complicated things came in

boxes with many, many parts and a long list of instructions. I can still hear my wife saying, "Have you got that thing together yet?"

People will sometimes ask us if we have things together yet. The answer is that things go together the way God makes them go together. We need to read the instructions that the Holy Spirit communicates through the pages of the Bible.

When God's joy is my strength, I have something for others. God brings good things into my life, and those are mine so that I can give them to others. Every ingredient that makes up the recipe of my life is vital. If I were to try to bake biscuits and I left out some ingredient, they would not be right. Either the taste, the shape, or texture would be all wrong.

God puts things into our lives. They get mixed together and then put into the oven of our experience. The patience of the Lord and the trials of life are designed to make us a provision for others. This is why we count it all joy when we fall into temptations, because God is perfecting us (James 1:2-4).

Giving Is a Great Gift

There is joy in this reality. Everything that

goes into our lives is there for the purpose of making something that can be given away. God desires that we have pleasure in this life, but He wants it to be the right kind of pleasure—pleasure that is found in His fullness. He gives us all things freely to enjoy.

Throughout the Bible, we learn how to enjoy what God has given us. It is a joy that doesn't change. God says, "I want you to realize that I bring joy into the world, a joy that is unspeakable."

God's joy is because of God's gift of His Son to us. Through God's love, we come to understand His personal, intimate friendship. He expects nothing back from us. We just enjoy what He gives us freely. He meets our needs. He gives us the joy of praising Him, and He really enjoys our praise.

Some people have trouble receiving things. They feel funny about accepting gifts, even from the hand of God. But God has given us all things. They are ours and they are for our joy. So I say, just enjoy them all.

CONCLUSION

The fruit of the Spirit is love, and joy is one aspect of love. The Word of God is a joyful thing to read. When we understand this, we do not have to enter into our funny cycles of mood swings.

It is very easy for us to fall into petty problems and to allow those things to steal our joy. Some people always tend to complain and make demands and get upset when things do not go their way. They feed on the ashes of their differences instead of enjoying and appreciating the diversity God has given us.

Here are some simple rules from the Word of God to live by: Believe the best about everyone. Think no evil (1 Corinthians 13:5). Trust in the Lord and you won't see the heat when it comes (Jeremiah 17:8).

Keep in mind, Jesus did not come to judge the world. Nor did He come to condemn it. He did not come to lay some trip on you or to put

you on trial. He came to die for you. The moment you believe in His death, burial, and resurrection, His Holy Spirit comes to live inside of you. He wants you to have His joy as your strength.

His joy will remain, and we can carry that joy with us everywhere we go, even into eternity.