

Training your brain for the life skill of Returning to joy

By Dave Batty

What place does joy have in your life? What robs you of joy? If you were to rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being lots of joy, and 1 no joy, how would you rate yourself? How would those living close to you rate you on this?

Does your face have permanent smile creases? Or are the frown creases deeper?

God has a lot to say about joy in the Bible. In one very short verse, in 1 Thessalonians 5:16, God says, “Be joyful always.” No exceptions are listed.

“That’s impossible!” This verse doesn’t really mean that. No one can be joyful all the time!

Put that thought on hold for a minute, and let’s take a look at your brain.

- ❖ **What is the path to pure joy?**
- ❖ **When should you start to train your brain to return to joy?**
- ❖ **How do problems in your life provide opportunities to experience God’s pure joy?**

Your brain is a muscle. Just like you had to train the muscles in your legs to walk, so you need to exercise the muscle in your head—your brain. If you are going to turn 1 Thessalonians 5:16 into reality in your life—to be joyful always—you will have to train your brain to return to joy.

Whether you are a teen, a parent, a single adult, or a senior, how can you begin to do what God tells you to do—to “be joyful always”?

What would it take to make you really happy? Not just today—but every day. How about a million dollars? Or how about 100 million dollars? But take an honest look around you—are those with more money really happier than you? Money can buy comfort and luxury, but can it really bring pure, lasting joy into your life?

Now, back to God’s command for us to “be joyful always.” Some would say that’s impossible. But isn’t that really a confession revealing we have not trained our brain to return to joy? That we have not developed our brain muscle to do the hard things?

Joyful people

Of all the people you know—who has the most joy?

When I reflected on this question, my answer was: “little children.” They have an incredible capacity to find joy—lots of joy—in the most ordinary things of life.

Just play “peek-a-boo” with a little child, and they laugh, and laugh, and laugh. Give them an ice cream cone or a piece of candy and their faces light up with joy. Or give them a present all wrapped in pretty paper, and they get so excited as they tear it open and find a new toy, or a doll.

If you walk into the room, after being gone for an hour or two, little children are so excited to see you, they jump up and down, and run and jump into your arms and give you a big hug! Now wives, how many of you do that when your husband comes home from work?

When should you start to train your brain?

God has given little children a great capacity to find joy in the little things of life. In the book, *Living from the Heart Jesus Gave You*, the authors describe 5 stages of maturity in the life of each person. With each stage, the person must master certain life tasks to reach the full potential of life at that stage. If you fail to master

these tasks, then damage begins in your life.

The first stage defined in this book is “infancy” from birth to age 3. One of the tasks children need to master at this level is how to return to joy. To put it simply, every one of us had the potential to master this skill—of returning to joy—by the time we were 3 years old.

Ideally, training your brain to return to joy should begin when a person is only a few months old.

At this early age, children can be influenced and guided by their parents to begin to face the problems in their lives and find a way to return to joy. Little children need to be taught how to return to joy when faced with situations that generate anger, fear, sadness, disgust, shame or despair.

Ephesians 4:26 says, “Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry.” (NIV) The pattern is clear—God wants us to find a way to quickly face these problems and return to the joy that He has for us.

Why do teens and adults lose the childhood skill of returning to joy?

When we grow up we seem to lose a lot of the joy we had as a little child. Why is that? In one word—problems. The problems often bring pain into our lives. We allow the difficult situations in our daily lives to rob us of the peace and joy God has for us for each day.

Many of those who come to Teen Challenge had learned a quick way to ease the pain—drugs. One lady shared, “Ever since I was a child, when I felt pain I would get high.” She went on to say after being at Teen Challenge for a month, “This

has been the most painful month of my life.” Why? She went on to share, “I always used to get high when I felt pain. Now for the first time in my life, I am facing the

The only way we will discover pure joy is to face the problems in our lives each day.

problems in my life without drugs.”

Lots of people today are self-medicating themselves with cocaine, heroin or alcohol to cover the painful memories of the abuse, shame, fear, or betrayal of broken relationships. They are putting into practice 1 Thessalonians 5:16, “Be joyful always,” but their joy is chemically induced. It’s not pure joy. And it

lasts only as long as the drug stimulates their brain. As soon as it wears off, the pain returns.

Discovering pure joy

God promises “pure joy” for us. James 1:2-4 gives a powerful strategy for experiencing pure joy. “²Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance.

⁴Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.” (NIV)

The path to pure joy is directly connected to many different trials we face each day. But notice two key things stated in James 1:2. If I am to discover God’s pure joy, I must “face” my problems. Pure joy doesn’t come just because I have problems in my life. The path to pure joy involves “facing” my problems.

What God says about real joy

God has a lot to say about joy in the Bible. In Nehemiah 8:10, it says, “The joy of the Lord is our strength.” If you don’t have much joy in your life today, ask God for some of His.

Psalm 118:24 says, “This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.” Read the whole Psalm 118 and you will see that verse 24 is surrounded by verses that talk about thankfulness, seeing the awesomeness of God, even in the midst of difficult times.

When you look at verse 24, it is clear that joy is a choice I make.

I choose to see each day as a bad day, or I choose to rejoice in it—based not on circumstances, but simply based on the truth that God has made this new day. That is reason enough to rejoice in it.

Galatians 5:22-23 lists joy as the second fruit of the Holy Spirit in the life of a person who has committed his or her heart to Christ.

In 1 Peter 1:8, it says the one who believes in Jesus can be “filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.” We must choose to take hold of this special joy.

The power of personal choices

The second key to experiencing pure joy is found in the first part of James 1:2. I must choose to “consider it pure joy” as I face my problems. The verse does not say, “Pray and ask God for pure joy.” It says I must make a choice. I can react to my problems with anger, fear, frustration, or despair—or I can choose to experience God’s pure joy.

James 1:2 tells me *what* I should do, but it does not explain *how* I can experience this pure joy. The next 2 verses in James explain this process a little more—and perseverance is a key part of this process. You don’t need perseverance for a problem that disappears in 10 seconds. You need perseverance for a problem that just doesn’t go away. It stays—day after day.

But verse 4 speaks to the benefits of persevering—we can become “mature and complete, not lacking anything.” So what’s Plan B, God? Can’t someone just pray for me so I can experience “pure joy” all the time? Prayer doesn’t produce pure joy. Facing your problems puts you on the path to pure joy.

Paul’s search for release from pain

Paul, great missionary and preacher, knew about this in a very personal way. In 2 Corinthians 12:7, he talks about having a “thorn in his flesh that tormented him.” His response—“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ ” (2 Corinthians 12:8-9 NIV)

I’m sure Paul prayed with passion, trusting that God would hear

his prayers and bring relief. Instead God says “No.” God does promise to give Paul power in his area of weakness. Not just a little bit of power, but all the power Paul needs to face this problem.

God’s power is made perfect, or complete, in our time of weakness. Paul could have gotten angry at God for not bringing relief in his time of pain. But instead, Paul shows he understands 1 Thessalonians 5:16—to be joyful always.

He gives his response to God’s answer of “No relief—only power to help in his weakness.” Paul says, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then

Finding joy in all the wrong places

Our world offers so many different ways to experience joy that fall far short of the pure joy that God offers us. Taking revenge against those who have hurt you may seem to offer real satisfaction—but it’s only an illusion of joy.

Many sinful activities offer joy, but it only lasts for a short time, and it never deeply satisfies. Once the joy is gone, shame and regret soon follow.

Criticizing others can seem to feed a pleasure center in our brain, but this too offers only an illusion of real joy.

If you fail to distinguish the difference between God’s path to pure joy and all the other paths the world offers, you will find yourself ever more frustrated. Chasing after joy in all the wrong places will never satisfy the deep hunger for pure joy.

I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 NIV)

Paul gets it! He sees that the path to “pure joy” is found in choosing to face his problems with God’s power. He chooses to “boast all the more gladly” about his weaknesses, and he goes on to say that he has chosen to “delight” in all the problems he is facing. Why? Because in doing so he can take hold of God’s power to help him through each difficulty.

This is not just a promise for spiritual super-stars. God’s promise is for each one of us—even little children only 12 months old!

The secret to real satisfaction in life

Paul learned that what really brought satisfaction into his life was not the absence of problems—but God’s presence and power to help him face each problem.

The path to pure joy is filled with choices every single day. When we wake up, we can say, “This is the day the Lord has made, I will be glad and rejoice in it.” Or I can say, “This is going to be a bad day, I can feel it already.” I have to choose.

There is no promise that the joy will come instantly when I make right choices. But these right choices put me on the right path. It may only take a few seconds, or it may take a few minutes, or hours. But as we make each choice, sometimes second by second, we can move in the direction of pure joy.

The power of God’s truth

These choices must be supported by God’s truth. You need to find verses in the Bible that speak God’s truth to the problems you are facing and write those verses down. Then memorize them, and review

them throughout the day. Instead of seeing each problem as something to ruin your day, you need to say, "This problem can be the key to my joy today!"

Begin to do a "pure joy" self-test throughout your day. Ask yourself, "How is my joy level?" If it's not where you want it to be, then tell yourself, "I must choose to take hold of God's pure joy." You've got to train your brain to return to joy.

If 5 minutes from now you find yourself caught up in anger, fear, frustration, etc., then you must make a new choice. Tell yourself the path to pure joy is "facing my problems." Don't demand other people to leave you alone. Instead, speak God's truth to yourself. Remember that when you are weak, God's power is always available.

Joy is right at your fingertips. You have to reach out and take hold of it. If you focus on all the problems around you, the joy will easily slip away. But if you fix your eyes on Jesus in the midst of each problem, you will find His power and His direction on how to get through this problem and return to His pure joy.

If a 12 month old child can learn how to return to joy—so can you!

For Further Study

Many of the ideas in this article were inspired from reading the book, *The Life Model: Living From the Heart Jesus Gave You*, by James Friesen, E. James Wilder, Anne Bierling, Rick Koepcke, and Maribeth Poole (2000), and the article, "Catastrophic Failure to Reach Adult Maturity and the Onset of Addictions," by E. James Wilder and Raymond Jones (2003). To order the book and an accompanying Study Guide, contact Teen Challenge.

Training your brain for the life skill of Returning to joy Discussion Guide

The following questions can be used for your personal reflection on this topic, or it can be used as a guide for a group discussion. If this is used in a group setting, please understand that you are not required to disclose the specific details of past sins, failures, or personal experiences.

1. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16. Rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being lots of joy, and 1 very little joy. How would you rate yourself? Explain the reason(s) for rating yourself this way.
2. Which of these emotions are your biggest battles that keep you from experiencing joy—anger, fear, sadness, disgust, shame or despair?
3. Read Psalm 118:24. What kinds of problems do you encounter in your mornings that make it a challenge to do what this verse says?
4. Read James 1:2-4.
 - A. What is your normal reaction when a problem comes into your life?
 - B. How difficult is it for you to face problems in your life instead of running from them, ignoring them, or blaming others?
 - C. What kinds of changes do you need to make in your way of thinking to be able to "consider it pure joy when you face many kinds of problems"?
5. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-11.
 - A. What was Paul's reaction when God said He would not remove from Paul the "thorn in the flesh" that was tormenting him?
 - B. How easy is it for you to get angry at God when He does not say "Yes" to your prayers?
 - C. What kinds of changes do you need to make in your way of thinking to be able to "delight" in your problems like Paul did?
6. Read 2 Corinthians 10:5. As you seek to train your brain to return to joy, what are the most common thoughts that you need to take captive and make them obedient to Christ?



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