



CHAPTER 1

The Genesis

Joy has never come naturally to me. When I was a child, back in the days of chalkboards and cage-free trampolines, I remember singing a Sunday school song that went like this:

“I’ve got peace like a river,
I’ve got love like an ocean,
I’ve got joy like a fountain in my soul.”

It was a great song with some fun actions, but the truth is that these lyrics presented a conundrum for me because it was impossible to sing them honestly. Peace like a river, love like an ocean, and joy like a fountain in my soul? Even if I ignored the first two claims, both of which seemed equally out of reach, the third statement could have tipped me over the edge of personal guilt.

I didn’t have joy like a fountain. I didn’t even have joy like a leaky faucet or a dollar store squirt gun. In fact, for many years of my life, joy seemed like a lost cause.

It began as an attack on my self-worth when I was just a child. Like that time in third grade when my small-town Sunday school class prepared a song for the Christmas concert at church and each

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of us was chosen to dress up as one of the animals from the manger scene. I couldn't have been happier with my assignment! Of all the messy, stinky, embarrassing barnyard animals I might have been, I was handpicked to play the soft and delicate dove.

Then one day at school, a boy from my Sunday school class told the other kids about our upcoming production. Beaming with pride and dignity, I chimed in to announce my role as the esteemed dove. But to my great horror, that boy looked at me in front of our classmates and said with the kind of insensitivity that only an eight-year-old boy could muster up, "Oh, I thought you were going to be the donkey!"

Now, this might seem like an inconsequential childhood memory, but I've never forgotten that moment. I cried about it in my bed that night, with my mom at my side trying to reassure me that I still had value and worth. But in that moment, I believed I was nothing but a donkey. A big, ugly, stupid donkey.

I wish I could say that I learned, through this childhood experience or others like it, that it really didn't matter what other people thought of me. I wish I had learned in that moment that joy was a choice, regardless of my circumstances. But unfortunately, that didn't happen. I just got older. And the "donkey" moments became more frequent, but less juvenile. They became heavier and more damaging.

Instead of a little boy calling me a donkey, the media started calling me fat and ugly. Perfectionism informed me that I could never measure up. Boys began to communicate that my worth came from my appearance and the accessibility of my body. My guilt enlightened me to the fact that, since I had made a few bad choices, I was no longer worthy of God's love.

Joy evaded me through elementary and middle school. Constantly plagued by one heartache or another, I started to wonder if things would ever get better. Then, what might have started out as your average adolescent angsty behavior, quickly took a turn for the worse when I developed an eating disorder by the age of fourteen. And if

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there's one thing I know about living with binge-purge type anorexia, it's that you're not exactly the life of the party.

In fact, in my case, I wanted nothing to do with parties at that stage. Parties meant people, food, and awkward clothes that showed off the body I hated. But all I wanted to do was hide away in my room with a bowl of popcorn and a bottle of diet Sprite until I could sneak into the bathroom unnoticed and ever-so-quietly flush the memory of that disgusting binge down the toilet, only to punish myself for it later.

This destructive cycle continued into adulthood, and by the time I was twenty-one, I had hit rock bottom. Parties were a different thing now—a place to drown my sorrows and seek the attention I so desperately craved. My life was an unqualified mess, laden with addictions, anxiety, and depression. Even after I finally recovered from my eating disorder in 2007 and managed to get my physical health back on track, I still had a long way to go when it came to internal healing.

Needless to say, joy was a challenge.

JOY LIKE A FOUNTAIN MOUNTAIN

The idea that I could experience life-giving, unbridled joy was never even a possibility in my mind. Joy was nothing like a fountain that welled up within me and poured out to the world around me.

If anything, I saw joy more like an enormous mountain that people like me, try as we might, would never be able to climb. The spectacular view from the summit was scarcely more than a figment of my imagination because only a lucky few would ever make it there. And I wasn't one of those people. So, I wondered, *Why bother with the first few steps of the journey if I know I'm not cut out for the climb?*

Maybe at some point in your life you've asked yourself that same question. Maybe, like me, you've had a difficult relationship with the

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concept of joy, and you're just not convinced that it's worth the effort anymore. Maybe you've read everything the Bible has to say about joy, but, for some reason, you just can't seem to apply it to your life in a meaningful way that sticks. And maybe, ever so slowly, you've begun to lose hope in the idea of joy altogether, surrendering to the lie that real joy is out of reach for someone like yourself.

If any of that sounds familiar, this book is for you.

This book is for the brave souls who are willing to examine the current level of joy in their lives and admit that it comes up short. This book is for parents who can see the effects of their own joylessness taking root in the hearts of their children but feel utterly helpless to stop it. This book is for anyone who relates to the idea that discovering joy is much more like an arduous climb up a steep, unforgiving mountain than a refreshing dip in a clean, sparkling fountain.

This book is for you because this book is for me. What I mean is that, in a sense, I am you... or, at least, I have been. I've been in all of those places. I've felt hopelessness sink in as I succumbed to the lie that true, biblical joy would never be possible for me.

But I was wrong. And I've never been happier to admit it!

After years of living under this oppressive mindset, God began to challenge my thinking. Exposing the lies that controlled my mind and showing me where my life didn't line up with his word, he began asking me to explore the pursuit of intentional, biblical joy.

So that's what I did. After numerous prods and nudges, I developed an intensive personal joy challenge to immerse myself in for an entire month. It was life-changing! Not only did I quickly begin to experience more joy, but I also made tons of powerful discoveries that have altered the trajectory of my life forever.

One of the things I learned is that, as it turns out, I was partly right about the fact that I'm not cut out to climb the impossible mountain of joy. In fact, none of us are, really, but not in the way I thought at first.

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The reason none of us are cut out to scale this mysterious mountain is because it doesn't actually exist. Yes, the experience of discovering joy does often feel like climbing a mountain. It can be difficult and laborious, and, sometimes, it can even feel downright impossible. But when we think of joy as the mountain itself, we miss the whole point of the analogy: Joy is not a destination to arrive at but a means by which we can complete a journey.

Joy is *like* a mountain. But the idea that we must reach the summit to achieve mountaintop joy is a myth fed to us by the devil himself to distract us from what's really going on down here. See, we're all on a mountain; that part is true. But the mountain is not joy. The mountain is simply life.

THE MOUNTAIN OF LIFE

We're all on a journey up the mountain of life.

The idea is that one day we'll reach the peak of our lives (the top of the mountain) and be able to look back on the journey with a sense of satisfaction and gratitude for what we've accomplished. But sadly, too many people don't make it that far. Buckling under the weight of their baggage or immobilized by fear at the sight of a rocky cliff or a perilous pass, they simply give up along the way.

I've seen far too many people stop right where they are, in the middle of the mountain, and admit defeat, sometimes moments before a breakthrough. Instead of reaching out for the help and tools they need to conquer the obstacle they face, they concede. "It's over. I've come as far as I'll go. I give up."

These people tend to live lives of regret. They go through the rest of their days wondering what might have happened if they had kept going. Instead of experiencing the fulfillment and satisfaction

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of reaching the summit, they settle for a comfortable plateau and lose sight of their purpose.

The truth is that we all have moments on the mountain when we want to give up. We all experience highs and lows, ups and downs, wins and losses. Most of us find ourselves living on a plateau at least for a season. But we don't have to stay there. We don't have to concede. Because it's not over, and we're still on the mountain. At any moment, we can pick up where we left off and face the giants we fear.

But how do we do that? When the going gets tough, when the storm clouds brew, when the mountain hits us with an avalanche of adversity, how can we hold it together and press on? How can we pick up the pieces, push through the pain, and prevail over the mountain rather than peter out at a plateau?

That's what this book is all about. In the pages that follow, I'm going to share with you what I believe is one of the key secrets to conquering the mountain of life.

Now, you might be thinking, *Wait a minute. I thought I picked up a book about joy. What does joy have to do with all of this?*

Friend, my answer is simple:

Everything.

Over and over, throughout the Bible, God prescribes joy for his people. As our creator, he knows that joy is in our best interest. He understands the disastrous effects that neglecting joy can have on our physical, mental, and spiritual health.

Proverbs 17:22 says, "A joyful heart is good medicine, but a crushed spirit dries up the bones" (ESV). And this isn't just a nice Bible verse; it's scientifically proven! Research shows that joy actually makes you healthier! Aside from the positive effects joy has on your brain, circulatory system, and autonomic nervous system, studies also show that happier people are more likely to live a healthy lifestyle, have stronger immune systems, and do a better job of dealing with stress.

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It's no wonder that God has so much to say about joy in his word! He's the architect who drew up the blueprints for how joy would affect our bodies, minds, and spirits. When God commands us to be joyful (Phil. 4:4) or to not be anxious (Phil. 4:6), he does so for our own good because he knows that without joy, our bones will dry up, which is really just a poetic way of saying that we'll start to waste away internally and eventually die.

DEAD MEN WALKING

Without joy, we're like dead men walking. When we let the hardships and obstacles that we face on the mountain drain us of life, rather than seeing them as an opportunity to take a dose of the "good medicine" that Proverbs 17:22 prescribes, we effectively sign our own death certificates.

But do you know what can't climb a mountain? A skeleton. Sure, there might be a lot of skeletons on Mount Everest today, but I assure you that none of them are walking. If we want to avoid this fate and make it up the mountain with our souls, minds, and spirits intact, we must not miss the critical importance of joy in the journey.

Romans 5:3-4 says, "We *rejoice* in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (emphasis added). These verses suggest that it's not only suffering, but *joy in the midst of suffering*, which produces three essential components in us that we'll need for a successful climb:

1. ENDURANCE

Endurance is what drives us forward, even when all the odds are stacked against us. It's what keeps our legs moving when everything inside of us tells them to quit. Climbing a mountain is hard work, and if we want to have any chance

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of making it all the way to the top, we're going to need endurance.

2. CHARACTER

Character is the internal compass that directs our decisions on the mountain. I've read that the average person comes up against 35,000 choices per day. Many of these decisions are small and insignificant, having very little impact on what happens on the mountain, but others will be the difference between life and death. And without a compass to guide us in the right direction, we'll put ourselves in unnecessary danger.

3. HOPE

Hope is what we cling to when our circumstances betray us. Hope believes that the top of the mountain is still coming, even when it looks like there's no way through. Hope is our last lifeline on the mountain, and if we run out of it, we're done for.

In that sense, hope is perhaps the most essential element of the climb. Orange Kids defines hope as "believing that something good can come out of something bad." And isn't that just what we need on the mountain?

This grueling journey is rarely easy, and things almost never work out the way we planned. Equipment fails, bodies grow tired, weather rages, and feet inevitably begin to slip on precarious paths. But hope always says, "Good will come of this yet."

When it comes to navigating the mountain of life, we'll quickly waste away without endurance, character, and hope. But let's not forget what's at the center of this whole progression: joy.

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We were created to experience joy and we don't stand a chance without it. If we don't prioritize joy in times of suffering, our misery will dry up our bones and send us to an early grave. We must not allow a lack of joy to deprive us of the essential equipment we require to complete our mountain journey.

Instead, we must learn to "rejoice in our sufferings." This doesn't mean we have to walk around with fake smiles plastered on our faces, telling our friends that "everything's great" when, really, it's not. But it does mean that we must make intentional decisions every day to choose joy regardless of our circumstances. Because if we don't, the implications are catastrophic.

A CRISIS

According to the World Health Organization, "one in four people in the world will be affected by mental or neurological disorders at some point in their lives." The statistics surrounding mental illness in our world are alarming. In any given year, around one in five people will be affected by a mental health problem or illness in the United States and Canada.

Unfortunately, the statistics don't seem to be any different within the church. In a 2014 study, Lifeway Research showed that 23% of pastors indicated that they had personally suffered from mental illness at some point in their lives.

Now, I'm not a researcher, but I did spend eight and a half years on staff at a North American church. Of the nine full-time staff members on our team, I could identify three individuals (myself included) who struggled openly with mental illness during our time on staff. And those were just the cases I was aware of. The church is not immune to the mental health epidemic we're facing in our world today.

JOY LIKE A MOUNTAIN

It's natural to think that the global mental health crisis is causing this severe lack of joy. No one experiences joy in the middle of a depressive episode or a panic attack. But I've begun to wonder if it might actually be the other way around. The more I study what the Bible has to say about joy and reflect on the state of our world, the more I wonder if, perhaps, we've arrived at this place as a society because we've neglected the discipline of joy.

Joy in suffering is never natural; it must always be chosen. And choice, by nature, requires discipline. The right decision is often the hard one, and it takes discipline to consistently choose what's wise when easier options so frequently present themselves.

Sorrow is an easier choice than joy. But could it be that, by neglecting to choose joy even in the midst of troubling circumstances, we've crippled ourselves on the mountain of life? Could it be that the lack of joy we see in our culture today is massively contributing to the decline of endurance, character, and hope in the world around us? Could this decline be partially responsible for the devastating effects of mental illness on our society? And within the church, could this explain why so many of us find ourselves in seasons of lukewarm or apathetic Christianity, floundering around for a sense of purpose and peace?

I think we actually have a joy crisis on our hands.

We're living in a society that's so characterized by stress, worry, busyness, and fear, and we don't seem to understand how the removal of joy from our faith experience is affecting not only our ability to trust God but also our ability to grow in endurance, character, and hope. It seems that we've become satisfied with a new kind of status quo in which stress and worry are not only acceptable but entirely conventional, and where it is often seen as an anomaly when a Christian chooses joy and strength in the face of great trials.

Many of us live such safe, comfortable lives in the context of Western Christianity that we rarely ever have the opportunity to suffer

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for our faith. As a result, we seem to have lost sight of the idea that joy in suffering is a discipline that causes necessary spiritual growth in our lives. Instead, we forfeit that growth for the comfort and control of worry and stress, and we allow our faith in God to become a cheap caricature of what the early church Christians experienced as their faith was tried and tested through persecution and fire.

I believe that now, more than ever, we need a move of the Holy Spirit to restore joy to his people.

A NEW BEGINNING

The time for a new beginning has come. We must not wait any longer. This isn't a problem we can keep putting off until a more convenient time because there's simply too much at stake. We must begin to understand the biblical foundation for joy today so that we can build toward a better tomorrow.

I'm not a mental health professional. Neither do I suppose that within these few short pages I'll be able to single-handedly eradicate the plague of mental illness. But my hope is that, in writing this book, I'll inspire the genesis of a new kind of journey for you, a joy-filled journey up the mountain of life.

That's why I'm writing this book. I'm writing this book as a person who has suffered the devastating effects of a joyless life, who has wrestled with the biblical narrative of joy, and who has found myself and the world around me lacking.

I'm writing this book as a person on the same mountain journey as you. The climb hasn't been easy, and there will be plenty more obstacles to overcome in the days and years ahead. But I don't want to give up. I want to endure through the pain, make characterful decisions, and hold onto hope that something better is coming. Because if I do, I

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know that I'll be able to reach the top of the mountain with a sense of fulfillment, satisfaction, and gratitude.

And I want that! But I don't just want it for me. I want it for my loved ones, too. I want it for the next generation. I want it for all of you.

But if we're ever going to get there, it's imperative that we uncover the mysteries of joy in the heavenward journey. As a faith community, we have a responsibility to ourselves and to those coming after us to address the joy crisis that's crippling us as Christians. If we don't, we risk leading the next generation into a future devoid of endurance, character, and hope, the effects of which we've already begun to feel today. Fortunately, the problems of today don't have to define the future.

So what are we waiting for? There's a joy revolution lying dormant in the heart of the mountain, just waiting for us to claim it and release it into the world. But it won't be found by dead men walking. So it's time to wake up. It's time to get out of your coffin, put some flesh on those bones, clothe yourself in joy, and join me on this journey up the mountain.

The revolution is now. And where does every good revolution begin?

With a worthy goal.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

On "The Genesis"

1. Can you see a correlation between joy and the growth of endurance, character, and hope (or the lack thereof) in your own life?
2. How has your life been impacted by the joy crisis facing our world today? How has this crisis affected the people around you?
3. Are you ready for a new beginning? If so, please read on.