

# Does God Really Like Me?

*Discovering the God  
Who Wants to Be With Us*

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InterVarsity Press  
ivpress.com

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## *Chapter One*

# What Is That Smell?

*O*n a trip to France during college, I (Cyd) was walking through a historic garden in Paris with my older sister. Rounding one of the reflecting pools, we both caught a familiar scent and stopped dead in our tracks. “Grandpa and Grandma’s backyard in Washington!”

Joy swept over us.

We had no idea what the smell was or where it was coming from, but in a split second we were transported from a thriving metropolitan city in Europe to a quiet backyard in the northwestern corner of the United States. All by a smell.

We searched the gardens and discovered juniper bushes, covered in bright red berries. We bent over and buried our noses in the bushes and began to reminisce about our summers in Washington state, visiting our grandparents. Our bodies were in France, but our minds and our memories were running barefoot through the mowed grass of a small-town backyard where we would salt slugs and lay pennies on the railroad tracks while our grandpa smoked salmon strung up on smoldering cedar planks.

That smell of juniper stirred up memories so sharp and clear that we not only remembered the slugs and the pennies but also the feeling of youthful innocence when we were surrounded by people who loved

us and watched over us with great delight as we reveled in the simple pleasures of childhood.

We hadn't been there for more than ten years, and it was over five thousand miles away, but that smell transported us from Paris to Lynden, Washington. We were filled with joy at the memory of being loved in such a lovely place, surrounded by people who were always glad to be with us. Our grandparents delighted in our presence, celebrated our accomplishments, prayed for us daily, played games with us, baked cookies with us, and were always interested in what we were up to. When we were with our grandparents, we were sure we were loved because of the delight they took in being with us. And in response we experienced the joy that came from being with people who were glad to be with us.

This delight, this joy, is what home is all about. It's what we're all looking for. And it's what many of us have never experienced. We're looking for a place to live in the presence of joy and from that place to venture out and contribute to the world. And it's never too late to come home to joy.

This book is about the return home—the return to joy.

### *The Joy of Creation*

Let's start with things at their best. At the beginning all of creation is caught up in the joy of belonging in God's presence. Because God delights in everything he has made, creation responds with joy. The Psalms regularly declare as much.

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
the hills gird themselves with joy,  
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
the valleys deck themselves with grain,  
they shout and sing together for joy. (Psalm 65:12-13)

Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it. (Psalm 96:11)

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth;  
break forth into joyous song and sing praises. (Psalm 98:4)

As the heavens and earth are filled with God's glorious presence, so too the heavens and earth are full of joy and praise.

Joy is the very foundation of reality. Joy is where life began and where life is headed. Creation begins with the joyful communion of God with humanity (the beginning of the book of Genesis), and at the end of all things God and humanity will dwell together again in great joy (the end of the book of Revelation).

Joy is the background music to our lives. It's the soundtrack. It's always there—we just don't always know how to access it. But when we do, joy changes everything. Joy brings us home to the place God made for us.

### *Joy in the Brain*

Joy is woven into the fabric of creation, and it's also wired into our brains. To understand the song of joy as it plays throughout creation, we need to understand a few things about how the brain works and how the capacity—even the necessity—for joy is built into us neurologically.

Humans are born with a fundamental desire to connect with other people. We desire to be wanted, to be delighted in, to be seen and known. We all need the presence of another person. We all crave—neurologically—the experience of joy. In fact, joy can be defined as the experience of being with someone who you feel connected to, someone who is glad to be with you.<sup>1</sup> This will be our definition of joy throughout this book. Tragically, many of us are born into environments that are far from joyful.

Ideally, when a baby is born into a healthy family, she is received with gladness. Her parents look on her with delight and the baby responds with joy. The baby is wanted—is loved. Her parents will make sure she has enough to eat, keep her warm and dry, cuddle her, sing to

her, hold her, and play with her. All along the baby's brain is awash in positive neurological activity, activating parts of the brain especially wired to trigger joy in response to other people. Every time the baby feels connected to someone who loves her, she grows stronger in her identity through the experience of joy.

By the time she is three months old, she will have images of her delighted caregiver's face firmly planted in her brain. These wordless images become the foundation for her identity. When she becomes distressed, her caregiver is there—even if just as a memory.<sup>2</sup> From comfort to a difficult situation and back to comfort, the baby's neural pathways are learning how to return to the joy of connection amid distress. This process can be called “returning to joy.”

During this early journey from distress and back to joy, the baby is internalizing some important things. Even in her preverbal state the tiny child knows that someone sees her, hears her crying, and understands what she is experiencing. Someone is glad to be with her and does whatever is needed to alleviate her distress (changing her diaper, feeding her, cuddling her, or rocking her to sleep). This empathy and attention are referred to as attunement.

Over time this process creates neural pathways capable of carrying the child out of pain and returning her to joy. As this happens over and over again the child internalizes that she is seen, heard, and understood. Eventually, even when her caregiver is not present, she can return to joy just by thinking of and remembering being loved.

### *Exploring from Joy*

Children—and then adults—with a firm foundation of joy also have the capacity to make positive contributions in the world. It starts with play and exploration. When a child has a firm foundation of joy, then, little by little, the child will adventure further and further into the world (even if it is just a new toy or the next room over). The bumps and bruises of exploration are overcome by being able to return to joy (either through the physical presence or the memory of a safe person).

A child with a firm foundation of joy assumes the world is a fundamentally safe place, even if it is punctured by occasional pain or distress. As the child grows into adulthood, their exploration and play turn into the courage and creativity to contribute to the world in a positive way.

Our brains are wired for joy. They are conditioned for connection.

### *Relational Experiences: Joy and Shame*

Joy is fundamentally a relational experience. Joy requires other people. You can't experience joy without another person present or without at least thinking about another person.

Sadly, many of us don't get a joyful start to life. For some of us our caretakers were absent or distracted. We grew up in a stressful or dangerous environment, or in a home or neighborhood where basic necessities were absent. We grew up learning that no one was there to hear us, no one sees what we need, and no one will act on our behalf. Or worse, we learn that the people who are supposed to care for us actually despise us.

This brings us to shame, the shadow side of joy. Shame is the experience of being with someone who is not glad to be with us. Shame is feeling disconnected from someone who isn't glad to be with us. Sometimes we feel shame because we sin and, as a result, we break our relationships with others and so experience disconnection.

But sometimes the disconnection is not our fault. We experience abuse, neglect, intense anger, and unearned disgust from others. In these situations we still experience a disconnection, even if the disconnection is not a result of our own sin. Although shame is often connected to our sin, shame can also be experienced because of someone else's sin coming at us.

Without healthy and loving relationships, it is difficult to experience joy and easy to experience shame. Many of us never had these healthy relationships. And many of us don't have much joy in our lives. We carry loads of shame instead.

Often our attempts to manage shame lead us into deeper sin and further away from joyful relationships. But that doesn't change the fact that we are driven by the desire to be in the presence of someone who is glad to be with us: the desire to be wanted, to be connected. And we search for these connections everywhere we go. When we don't find them in relationships, we look for them in things—in chocolate, wine, distractions, and addictions. But these aren't capable of building joy. They are false substitutes. And our world is saturated with the smell of false joy, fake belonging, and artificial connection. The joy of creation and our certainty of belonging with God are drowned out by the stench of sin and shame.

### *Identity and Joy*

Let's get back to the brain for a moment. Joy is experienced in the same part of the brain where our sense of identity is built.<sup>3</sup> When someone has a strong foundation of joy, he knows who he is. He is the same person when he is angry, sad, afraid, or glad. His emotions do not change his understanding of himself or the way others experience him. He has a steady sense of self and does not need to pretend to be someone he's not. Because he feels safe and strong, he can be himself.

Conversely, someone who does not have a strong foundation of joy has a fragile identity. It will seem like he changes into a different person when he is overwhelmed by negative emotions. The person you thought you knew will disappear and someone else seems to take his place—even if for just a moment. He will lose himself in these emotions, and you'll wonder how he can be capable of such different kinds of behaviors.

Joy is the foundation of our identity and our resilience. Our neural pathways are wired as a result of our early experiences of joy. Without a strong foundation of joy, we struggle for identity and are crippled by shame. It's no wonder Scripture declares, "The joy of the LORD is [my] strength" (Nehemiah 8:10).

The good news is that our brains are changeable. It's never too late to connect with someone who is glad to be with you and to experience the joy of that connection. When this happens, new neural pathways are formed. Your brain can be literally “transformed by the renewing of your minds” (Romans 12:2).

### *Presence and Purpose*

Springing from a foundation of joy is the capacity for creative contribution. The joyful presence of one person gives us the ability to pursue creative work on behalf of other people—passing along both joy and love. If we feel we belong, then we will be free to bless others.

Presence and purpose. Connection and contribution. Belonging and blessing. These are the fundamental notes of joy that will sound throughout this book.

Because everything already belongs in God's presence, joy is the natural state of all things. When we listen closely, the sound underneath everything that exists is the song of joy. Joy is the song sung in response to God's presence, the one who is glad to be with us, and with all of his creation.

### Practice: Finding Your Joy Place

Think back over your life and try to remember a place where you felt safe and at peace, a time when you felt relaxed and okay. It could be an outdoor place—like on a beach or sitting in a tree. Maybe it's an indoor place like a quiet reading chair or a kitchen table. Close your eyes and remember this place as completely as you can. Imagine yourself being there, noticing the sights, sounds, feels, smells, tastes. Notice what it feels like in your body to be there. Spend a minute enjoying this place using your imagination. Notice what it feels like to be safe and at peace. Then take some time to thank God for this place, no matter how small or normal it might seem.

## Reflection

Remember the last time you were with someone who was glad to be with you.

How did the person greet you?

How could you tell that they were glad to be with you?

What was it like to be together?

This is what joy feels like.

## Song

Listen to “Joy” by Rend Collective. Will you open yourself again to the hope of joy?



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**Creation is a place of joy, where God is “glad to be with us.”**

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