

Persistent Joy

by Jon Gauger

Like many Christians--maybe like you--I have never considered joy a fit subject for in-depth consideration. Joy comes across too syrupy, too lightweight. Too much like happiness which is flitting and fleeting. Joy is the iridescent butterfly that perches--teasingly-- near enough to catch your eye, but far enough that it can never be caught. Or held. Or touched.

Yet the steps of my life have crisscrossed with others whose shocking circumstances and persistent joy have forced me to take a second look. And a third.

Meet three friends of mine, whose names I've changed, but whose stories are true. They are all life-long followers of Jesus, walking separate paths of pain.

There's Alan, who, in the space of just a couple years, saw his wife die of heart failure, saw his son go through a bitter divorce, and then stopped seeing. Because his eyes finally gave out. Alan's troubles continue, and he has experienced additional devastating loss--for a time was even confined to a wheelchair. Yet amazingly, he is never without a smile, never without a joke, never without a word of encouragement. He almost drips with joy. Today, Alan walks with the assistance of a guide dog, but the truth is, Alan is the best guide for life that a seeing person could ever hope to have. How could he be so joyful...I wonder.

Then there's our friend Nancy. She's had recurring issues with cancer for years and years. Nancy is a core member of church's worship team and before I ever knew one thing about her cancer, I was intrigued with the peaceful smile that rarely seems to leave her face. We've watched as Nancy has gone through surgeries and chemo and bone replacements. She has slipped and fallen and broken brittle bones. But her joy is unsinkable. Frankly, I don't get it. Where does this joy come from?

Then there's Robert. Early on in his marriage--when the kids were very small--Rob discovered that his wife had a mental disorder. Severe psychological issues. To the point where she was hospitalized...and finally institutionalized.

Rob has lived much of his married life as a single man. But you can never, ever talk to him without getting an earful about how wonderful his lovely wife is...and how he enjoys visiting her...and is full of hope that maybe some day...

The lack of bitterness in his soul, where mine would surely be ensconced, is unnerving, almost shocking.

Whenever I'm with one of these three people, I always come away asking, "Where do they get it--this sense of persistent joy--right in the middle of their very troubled circumstances?" How can they possibly smile, while I readily frown at much lesser struggles?

Am I merely an immature, self-obsessed wimp? Or are these people super spiritual?

Of course, I know the Sunday-School approved answers. I can even quote you Bible passages about joy.

Still, I watch....and wonder. About joy. Persistent joy.

Lacking answers, I'm Jon Gauger for Moody Radio, and lately, persistent joy is what I've been pondering.