

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

Elements: Joystick

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We have created an 'Elements' booklet and if you didn't get one last weekend, I encourage you to pick one up. It is a wonderful resource. It has a reading plan and some put-into-practice ideas. This is unbelievable to me, our worship team created an instrumental album, like a soundtrack to go with this series. Go to www.theaterchurch.com/elements, you can find it there. And I Tweeted it. I really don't know if this matters or not but when I'm writing or even when I am studying, I always have a soundtrack going. Part of it goes back to that whole theory years ago about if you are listening to classical music, it will make you smarter than you are. They think it works for babies so if it works for babies, it probably works for adults so that's always been my habit. All these sermons are bathed in that kind of thing. So I always pick a song. When I wrote the Circle Maker, it was a song from the Truman Show soundtrack Raising the Sail that I would put on repeat and I would listen to it thousands of time. It helped me get in the groove. When I wrote the Grave Robber, it was the piano version of a Mumford and Sons song because sometimes lyrics distract me. So right now, I am so digging this instrumental album. I probably shouldn't have favorites but Faithfulness and Peace is a toss-up. They are so good! We are a full-service church. We want to help you any way we can and that's why we provide all these resources. So let's take advantage of it.

Last week, we kicked off our 'Elements' series but the thing that totally impacted me, by the way, could you not listen to Dick Foth all day!! I love to listen to him. He is a grandfather to this church, so do you remember this little distinction he made? He said there are two kinds of people in the world, those who walk into a room and it's like they say here I am, I am here, it is all about me. And then the second group is the there you are group! Where it is all about everybody else. I just have to share this because my big thing last week was to just try to live this way. Then it happened to me. On Thursday, we hosted the first public screening of A.D., the mini-series produced by Roma Downey and Mark Burnett that is going to air on Easter on NBC. So we were pretty excited to be able to show that first episode and I wish you could have been there when Producer Mark Burnett showed up and we greeted each other in the Green Room. Mark's resume includes Survivor, The Voice, The Apprentice, Shark Tank, 112 Emmy nominations but what I love about Mark is none of it has gone to his head. He walked in and he said, 'There you are!' and gave me a big man hug! It didn't surprise me at all. Lora and I met Mark and Roma a few years ago and they are so gracious and so down to earth. But I think when it happened to me this week, it was just this reminder, could we be a church of 'there you are' people. Let's be that kind of church.

This weekend, we continue. We are going to talk about joy. Turn to Job 6:10 and we will get there in a minute.

It was probably a month ago that my daughter Summer introduced me to a podcast called Invisibilia. The first episode was titled The Secret History of Thoughts and it told the story of a South African man named Martin who was normal in every way until he turned 12 when he contracted a strange illness that totally incapacitated him. He lost the ability to move and to speak. Zero ability to express himself in any way whatsoever except for an occasional

involuntary head jerk. The doctors' best guess was a form of meningitis. Martin was reduced to a persistent vegetative state. The doctors thought he would die but he didn't. He was in that state for more than a decade. A specialist told his parents that he had zero intelligence and zero awareness. But Martin mysteriously and miraculously woke up. But he had no way of telling anybody that he woke up so no one knew. He was a prisoner inside his body. He was aware of everything but he couldn't move his body, couldn't speak, so Martin was dropped off at a medical care center. Day after day, week after week, month after month for 13 and a half years. When he was force fed scalding hot food, he couldn't tell them how much it hurt. When he needed help, he couldn't even cry like a baby, he couldn't even cry. Perhaps worst of all, he was put in front of a television set tuned to Barney and TeleTubbies! Martin has since confessed that there are a few things that he hates more than the purple dinosaur! But he couldn't tell them to change the channel. Silent witness to the world around him. Totally alone and totally powerless. Almost. Almost. In this book, Ghost Boy, Martin says,

I was completely in tune but the only person who knew there was a boy in this useless shell was God and I had no idea why I felt his presence so strongly. He was with me as my mind knitted itself back together. He was as present to me as air, as constant as breathing and He was the only person I could talk to.

And he did. I know, some of you feel like Martin. So alone, so scared, so bitter, so depressed. You feel like this man who called himself Ghost Boy. It looks like everything is going great for everybody around you and you feel like there is not anybody else that can really identify with you but I promise you that there is. There is not a person here that doesn't have some shameful secret, that doesn't have some debilitating fear, that doesn't have some bitter memory that they cannot forget. If the statistics hold true, across our campuses, 171 of you are experiencing severe depression and you don't know how to get out. You feel trapped. I want you to know that for starters, we have been praying for you this week. I want you to know that this message is for you.

Here's my fear this weekend, I could come in and beat the joy drum and have a ra ra sermon, but sometimes when you talk about something that someone hasn't experienced in a very long time, instead of helping them experience it, you make them feel ever worse. What I don't want to do is I don't want to leave 171 people in the dust. I feel like I could talk about joy in a different way but I feel like this weekend we have to go to rock bottom.

That brings me back to Martin. See everyone acted as if he didn't exist anymore, even his mom and dad. Their little boy wasn't there anymore. Martin was a job for the nurses. Martin was a burden. Martin was a vegetable. But there was one nurse, a nurse named Verna who was convinced that Martin was more aware than anyone thought. So one day, 13 and a half years after losing his ability to speak, Martin visited the Center of Augmentative and Alternative Communication. Using infrared sensors that tracked eye movement, a doctor asked Martin to identify pictures on a screen and he did it! Let me tell you what happened. Martin eventually learned to use a joystick to communicate. A joystick! Double entendre intended! So that's the title of this message, Joystick.

Martin learned to use a joystick and a keyboard to communicate via a computerized voice. Are you ready for this? Listen, it has been a long uphill climb. Martin still has his profound challenges, but two years later, he got his first job and then he went to college and then he started a web design company and then he wrote a book. Oh and one more thing, then he fell in love and got married. I'll come back to that.

I think the thing I find interesting this weekend is that is exactly what so many of you want. You want that degree. You want to start that company. You want to write a book. For many of you, you have a desire to get married. Listen, Martin did it against all odds with God's help, and all he had was a joystick.

With that as a backdrop, Job 6:10. But in all fairness, we ought to read the first five chapters. It is really not fair to not have that five chapter on ramp but I'm going to trust that maybe some of you will read those five chapters and it will help but this in context.

*Then I would still have this consolation—
my joy in unrelenting pain—
that I had not denied the words of the Holy One.*

This verb only appears one time in the Hebrew language. Only one time in the Hebrew Scripture does this word for joy, rare joy, it means triumphant relation even in the face of staggering loss. It means to jump for joy, and I like this last definition, it means to leap like a horse so stones spark. Can you envision a horse leaping so that sparks fly on the stones? What imagery! And the reason why this is so profound to me here is it makes no sense whatsoever, not if you know what just happened to Job. He has just lost everything. He has been stripped to the studs. He has been reduced to nothing. Apart from a persistent vegetative state, it is hard to imagine a circumstance that would be more difficult than what Job has just endured. He lost his family. He lost his wealth. He lost his health. It's all gone. And then he wishes he had never been born. Yet Job chooses joy, even in unrelenting pain. We are talking physical pain with no pain meds! I think it is the emotional pain that compounds it in such a profound way. He is burning with grief, yet he refuses to deny God or compromise his integrity.

Let me hit the rewind button and go back to the most catastrophic day imaginable. What does Job do after he loses everything? The Bible says that he tears his clothes and shaves his head and falls down on the ground and he worships God. He worships God. Then he says something that must have been his most fundamental conviction. He said naked I came from my mother's womb and naked shall I return, the Lord gave and the Lord hath taken away, blessed by the name of the Lord. And there it is. We can't get away from it. Our 'Blessings' series ended. I've said this so many times and we are going to get it one of these times, that to enjoy anything without giving thanks to God is as if you have stolen it from the Almighty. So Job, in these circumstances, says blessed be the name of the Lord.

Let me give you a simple definition of joy. It is not comprehensive but it is true. Joy is not getting what you want, despite what we think. Joy is appreciating what we have. Sometimes what little we have. Joy is appreciating what we have.

Here's what I'm not going to do this weekend. I'm not going to beat a dead horse. I mean, how many times have I talked about counting our blessings. I'm on number 149 and shooting for 1,000. Today, number 149, 13 years ago today, I was over at Washington Hospital Center. Our son Josiah had been born the day before. Josiah just turned 13 yesterday so we have another teenager! The day after he was born, a lawyer visited the hospital and he had some papers. I signed those papers and we became the legal owners of 201 F Street, a little crack house that is now Ebenezer's Coffee House. 13 years ago today!

When it comes to joy. Let me say this. It is not just about joy but it is about rejoicing. It is about enjoying over and over and over again. We could talk about that but we are not going to. I want to focus on another dimension of joy. This sounds so simple, appreciate what you have, but we all know it is not. You have to work at it and you have to fight for it. But here's what I believe, it is a choice. Joy is something you choose. Sometimes it is an easy choice. At the end of an amazing day, sometimes it is the easiest thing in the world to experience joy. But sometimes it is the hardest choice we make. I would suggest that it is the hardest choice that Job made on this day. So that is where I want to focus our attention this weekend.

One way or the other, you can choose joy. You might be thinking, that's easy for you to say. Well, it is not easy for me to say every day, I promise you that. I could tell you about some of those days but let me put it this way, it wasn't easy for Victor Frankel. Frankel survived a Nazi concentration camp and wrote about his experience, Man's Search for Meaning. Everything was taken away from him. He was stripped of his clothing, his pictures, his personal effects. They even took away his name. He was reduced to a number. He was number 119,104. Everything was taken away. But there was one thing they couldn't take away. Frankel put it this way, everything can be taken away from a man but one thing, the last of human freedoms to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. The most important choice you make every day is your attitude. Your internal attitudes are far more important than your external circumstances. And just like faith, I think joy is mind over matter. I'm not talking about a Jedi mind trick or Smalley's things we say to ourselves. This is about understanding that the Lord gives and the Lord takes away. It is all from God and it is all for God. And when you look at life that way, everything becomes a gift.

That brings me back to Martin. Let me tell you how Martin and Joanna fell in love. When Martin regained his ability to smile, which was quite an accomplishment, he did it all the time. He said that often his face would hurt from smiling. And that's what Joanna fell in love with. I love this little dialogue in the book. Martin has just taken a bite of a crème caramel and he is savoring it and Joanna says, 'You look so happy,' and Martin's response is, let me nuance it and see if you can capture this, Martin says, 'Joanna has told me that the pleasure I take in things is one of the greatest joys I give her. She says that she has never seen anyone revel in things as much as I do and it makes her happy to see that the world astounds me so often because there are almost as many new things as there are ways to experience joy.'

Did you catch that? Almost! But not quite. In other words, there are infinite ways to experience joy. And perhaps some ways that we haven't discovered just yet. I know that all of us are on different places on the joy spectrum. I would love to see this notch up a little bit. But if you are down here, I think there is something to learn from Martin.

And that brings us back to our definition. It is not about getting what you want, it is appreciating what you have. The Westminster Catechism, the very first point says this: the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.

Can I push the envelope a little bit in the way that might cause a little consternation or you might at first have a little bit of an allergic reaction to it, but I wonder if our greatest shortcoming is not feeling bad enough about what we have done wrong, but perhaps our greatest shortcoming is not feeling good enough, not rejoicing enough, not celebrating enough the goodness of God. If our chief end is to enjoy Him forever, and things were created by Him and for Him, every good and perfect gift comes from above, then shouldn't we be the people who celebrate the most? We are the people who know how to enjoy, to experience the joy of the Lord.

One click point, let me talk for a minute about the law of dimensioning marginal utility. It sounds fancy but it is really quite simple. At some point, more is less. As you increase consumption of a product while keeping consumption of other products constant, there is a decline in the marginal utility you derive from consuming each additional unit of that product. I have tested this theory with gummy bears. For many years I have tested this theory and concluded that it is true. The more you consume, the less you enjoy. I think this has a lot to do with our measure of joy. We just think that it is getting what we want, but I'm telling you it is not. It is really enjoying the simple pleasures.

When everything was lost, Martin regained the most basic capacities and learns to revel in those things and enjoy those things, that's where it's at.

Now, I don't think you have to lose everything to experience this kind of joy. There is a way to do it another way. I have a theory that the more you give away, the more you enjoy what you keep. If you start tithing, giving God the first 10 percent, I believe that you will enjoy that 90 percent you keep at least 10 percent more. Then try a double tithe, give God 20 percent and I have a hunch that you will enjoy the 80 percent 20 percent more.

There is a well-documented study that suggests money stops making people happier, that a family at around \$75,000, there are factors, cost of living, number of children, so that number fluctuates a little bit, but once you hit that magic number, a dimensioning marginal utility kicks in and you aren't going to find joy there.

I don't know how this came up but Lora and I were on a coffee date and she had read this little phrase 'sacrifice of joy' and it came up in our conversation. I'm so familiar with sacrifice of praise but I was like, where is sacrifice of joy? Sure enough, Psalm 27:6

*Then my head will be exalted
above the enemies who surround me;
at his sacred tent I will sacrifice with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make music to the LORD.*

Isn't that what Job was doing? He was bringing a sacrifice of joy unto the Lord. It is when you find joy in the most difficult of circumstances. It is when you find joy not because of what God

has done for you but in spite of your circumstances. It is when you hit rock bottom. Where do you land? Where do you go?

One more verse, Psalm 30:5

*For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime;*

*weeping may stay for the night,
but rejoicing comes in the morning.*

That's a sermon unto itself right there. Here's where I want to speak hope to those of you that have struggled and felt trapped, I know probably most all of us have had a dark night of the soul but when it becomes challenging is when that dark night turns into a dark week or a dark month or a dark year. I've gone through seasons where it just feels like that is a cloud hanging over me. Call it an emotional funk or an emotional slump. You just can't get it right, something is off. But I want to tell you that joy comes in the morning. This is the promise we are going to stand on this weekend. We are going to believe that God's Word is true.

I woke up this morning and just happened to notice that God was painting the sky the most brilliant color. I drove down to the Capitol and felt like I should capture it in a picture. It was unbelievable. Wow! God did it again!

The first day of this year, I started in Genesis 1 and I only got to verse 5, and here's what I read

⁵ God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night." And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

I think that struck me because I think the first day of the year is a chance to start over again and I love that. I can't tell you how many times I have taken this for granted but I have come to appreciate, because Lora and I might say to each other at the end of a tough day, like, sometimes you just need to go to sleep. The sun will come up tomorrow! But it's more than just some cute little song. God knew what He was doing. He knew there would be days when we had to call it a day and go to sleep so that we can start over the next day. His mercies are new every morning like a sunrise! This is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it. Every morning is a little resurrection, is it not? Then God says I'm going to bookend it with two amazing miracles. Sunrise. Some mornings are going to be more spectacular than others and today's was. But if that isn't good enough, let's end it with this miracle called the sunset and that is a reminder of the sunrise that is coming tomorrow.

I know that some of you, sorrow is coming in the night, but I want to tell you that joy comes in the morning. I don't know who said it first but it is true, everything minus Jesus equals nothing and nothing plus Jesus equals everything.

When you hit rock bottom, what I need to know is that my Redeemer lives. What I need to know is that God is still seated on his throne. What I need to know is that the best is yet to come and I think I can say that with complete authority and the authority of Scripture. God has plans and purposes for you. If you are still breathing, it is because He is not done with you. That is not just some platitude. We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus to do good works prepared for us in advance. He is ordering your footsteps. He is preparing good works in advance. No good thing will God withhold from those who walk uprightly before Him. If God is for us, who can be against us!

So let's stand on God's promises that when all seems lost, it is not because we are found in Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.

Lord I pray for those who might be here this weekend and they are grasping and feel so lonely and so hopeless, but Lord You have met them this weekend right here right now. God I pray that they would have the courage to accept the invitation that You extended to come follow You. I pray that this day would change everything and that they would put their full faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We have a promise, to as many as have received Him to them He gave the power to become the children of God. So welcome to the family! In Jesus' name, Amen.

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