

# Heaven's Joy

"Americans are amongst the loneliest people in the world. I'm not talking just about divorce -- we are a very mobile country. Generally speaking you graduate from high school, move away from home for college, and then you move again for your job, and most people will switch jobs 2-3 times. Now, there's nothing inherently evil about this but it contributes to the loneliness in the United States, and you couple this with a high divorce rate in the country and that makes for some very lonely people."  
-- Eric Snyder

The nuclear and cooperative extended family is an endangered species in the industrialized West. Most communities are composed of neighbors in name only. Meanwhile, multiple aspects of our daily lives are encouraging further and further isolation – our work, our education, even our entertainment.

A study by the American Council of Life Insurance reported that the most lonely group in America are college students. Next on the list are the divorced, welfare recipients, single moms, rural students, housewives and the elderly.

Charles Swindoll mentioned an ad in a Kansas newspaper. It read, "I will listen to you talk for 30 minutes without comment for \$5.00." Swindoll said, "Sounds like a hoax, doesn't it? But the person was serious. Did anybody call? You bet. It wasn't long before this individual was receiving 10 to 20 calls a day. The pain of loneliness was so sharp

that some were willing to try anything for a half hour of companionship"

A true sense of community is essential to a healthy Church. It's been said that as our lungs require air, so our souls require what only community provides. Consider that we are designed by God (who Himself is a group of three persons living in profound relationship with each other) and in His image.

"Christ works on us in all sorts of ways...But above all He works on us through each other. Men are mirrors or carriers of Christ to other men...Usually it is those who know him that bring him to others." -- CS Lewis

What's heaven like? As we read of it in scripture, we only get glimpses, but they are startling and compelling. Paul wrote humbly, "I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter." It is written of Jesus, that, "for the joy set before Him" He endured the cross. And, we're all aware of the Apostle John's description of the streets of gold and gates of pearl. So what we do know of it is that what is spoken and seen there is mind boggling at the least.

But the part that fascinates more than any other is the aspect of its community. Consider that we are instructed to regard God as our Father, Jesus as our Bridegroom, our Brother, our Friend and the Holy Spirit as our Comforter. We are described as brethren and family, (Eph 3:15) integrated so tightly as to

be like parts of the same body or living stones in a temple – joined together perfectly (Eph 2:21,22; 4:15,16; Col 2:19). With all focus upon our God (Rev 4 and 5), heaven is truly about community. In fact, as you study Revelation, you can't help but be impressed with its sense of togetherness. As God's character fills all, heaven's essence is genuine, loving relationship in every direction. Even while we're here on earth, Christ said, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them." (Mat 18:20)

Our Father "made us alive together with Christ...raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly in Christ." (Eph 2:5, 6) Together. Together. Together. It resounds in scripture, but too often it echoes only faintly in the halls of our existence. For many Christians, the closest thing to a sense of community they get to experience is a weekly hour or so in a prayer breakfast or home fellowship group. Hey, these are indeed great, but they're like the first step in a marathon – a means and not an end.

Jesus described the **cause of joy in heaven** in Luke 15 with three parables. In the first, there was a lost sheep – when it was found and united with the flock the owner called his friends and neighbors together to rejoice; in the following parable of a lost coin – the woman who finally finds it also calls her friends and neighbors together to rejoice; in the story of the lost son – the outcome is a relationship restored and a grand celebration. Friends, family, neighbors – the

community of heaven. Not only do these parables point clearly to finding what was lost and a consequent reuniting, but in each case there is a celebration with others who cared. And why would they care? Because Jesus was also saying that heaven is a community that is composed of truly integrated lives and truly incredible relationships.

Acts 2:44 says of the early church, "...ALL THAT BELIEVED WERE TOGETHER..." This passage has led sincere believers to adopt at least a couple of different perspectives – either that their model of communal living was the epitome of how a real church ought to function or that it was a dismal failure and is irrelevant to our time. I like however, what my former pastor Jon Courson has to say about it...

"If you were around in the 60's and 70's, you might remember the many communal-type ministries which sprang up on the West Coast. Where are they now? Why didn't they work? I suggest they failed in their attempt to duplicate what happened in Acts 2 because there was no inherent reason for them to do so. On the Day of Pentecost, 3,000 folks got saved in one day — 3,000 people who had come from all over the world to celebrate Pentecost. Following their conversion, they sensed the need to remain in Jerusalem in order that they might be grounded in their new-found faith. But what were they to do? Jump on a 747, fly home, get their stuff, and come back?"

"You see, the early Church didn't arbitrarily say, 'Wow! Here's a groovy idea: Let's live communally!'

No, the believers in Jerusalem pooled whatever resources they had for the express purpose of allowing the new believers to remain in Jerusalem rather than having to return to the lands from which they came.”

“I suggest to you that we may very well see Christians living communally again — but it won't happen because someone says, 'Here's a neat idea...' If persecution were to fall upon this country, which it may; if the economy were to collapse, which it might; if things really get tough, which they could — you'll be amazed how quickly and how beautifully the Church will come together communally. But until then, it's artificial.” —Jon Courson

Regardless of method, this side of heaven we are clearly called by Christ to demonstrate to the world the sense of community, of belonging, of acceptance that only God's love can accomplish (John 13:34,35; 17:20-23). Easy theoretical love is always at a distance, it doesn't touch, it doesn't commune with the object of its affection. This kind of love is the staple of dead religion. Real love naturally integrates the life of one with another and another and another into a masterful and divine tapestry.

Now, our modern church organizations have become experts at gathering people for a few hours at a time, but as good and necessary as these gatherings are, they only serve a very temporal purpose if they don't nurture the ongoing process of linking lives to The Life and thus to one another. The call to each of us is to foster

fellowship and to build the body in radically loving ways as a life-style. The Great Commission is NOT just finding the lost but building them into a community representative of God's nature.

“The experience of authentic community is one of the purposes God intends to be fulfilled by the church. The writings of Scripture lead one to conclude that God intends the church, not to be one more bolt on the wheel of activity in our lives, but the very hub at the center of one's life...”

-- Randy Frazee

Some have made sound doctrine of scripture the main point of their ministry and we need that. Some have made godly worship their focus and we need that. Some have emphasized evangelism and missions as their main thing and we need that. But apart from demonstrating to the lost world the beauty of godly community, we fall short -- especially in these last days. In fact, the Bible indicates that it is in these days more than any others that we must be in close community relationship.

Heb 10:25 says -- “*not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching.*” Friends, the Day of the Lord is fast approaching. And in this day of increasing isolation and selfish independence, we need communities of Christian faith based upon sincere discipleship.

Sure, the application can be pretty sticky, kind of a pain. But, that reminds me of a story told by the philosopher Schopenhauer – ‘a

group of porcupines were marooned one bitter cold night in the middle of a large frozen field. There was no way to escape the biting wind. They could not burrow into the frozen ground. As they huddled together to keep warm, their sharp quills began to pinch and hurt. The closer they moved together, the more the pain increased. Some of the animals could not bear the pain and drew apart to sleep alone. In the morning they had frozen to death. They didn't survive.’

“*Friendship is necessary, like philosophy, like art... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival.*” --CS Lewis

May we be stirred to emulate heaven, to understand that as it is fundamental to the joy we'll know there, it is here as well. Certainly, we're going to struggle with it in our human frailty, but we must be, more than ever, making the effort to be bound together in loving community – not in word, not in theory but in fact. May those of us who feed the flock and/or find the flock also fellowship with the flock. Jesus did. May we all, in following our Lord, help create that heavenly sense of community where ever we go. It's a real part of heaven's joy.