

*Defiant*  
JOY

Also by Stasi Eldredge

*Captivating*

*Love and War*

*Becoming Myself*

*Free to Be Me*

*Defiant*  
**JOY**

*TAKING HOLD OF HOPE,  
BEAUTY, AND LIFE IN A HURTING WORLD*

**STASI ELDREDGE**



**NELSON  
BOOKS**

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*For Jesus,  
the fount and future of all joy.  
It's all for You.*



*And those the LORD has rescued will return.  
They will enter Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy will crown their heads.  
Gladness and joy will overtake them,  
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

—ISAIAH 35:10





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# Introduction

**W**hy *Defiant Joy*? Why not read a book simply on joy? The answer is an easy one. In this world where we find ourselves living, having joy often feels both crazy and out of reach. That's why the title of this book includes the word *defiant*. Defiant means to stand against the tide. It means to go against the flow, even when the flow is composed of a strong current of despair and difficulty.

To have joy in the midst of sorrow—or the current news feed—can seem impossible. And all on our own, it *is* impossible. But just as the angel Gabriel said after making his outlandish proclamation to Mary that she, a virgin, would give birth to the Savior of the world, “Nothing will be impossible with God” (Luke 1:37 NASB).

Joy is meant to be ours, a joy that is defiant in the face of this broken world. Our hearts are to echo the heartbeat of our joyous God. Now, this isn't about skipping around in the garden singing, “I'm so happy in Jesus every day.” This is

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about being present to whatever may be coming our way and, in the midst of both the goodness and the grief, knowing joy.

Believing that sorrow and loss do not have the final word takes defiance. It requires a strength of spirit that must be nurtured. It means engaging our lives fully but interpreting them by the highlight of heaven. Denying the truth of reality is not the answer; being fully present to it is.

The invitation from God to “rejoice, again I say rejoice”<sup>1</sup> comes to us in the middle of our lowest lows as well as our highest highs. How do we do that? Let’s find out together.

*One*

## A Holy Defiance

*Joy is the serious business of Heaven.*

—C. S. LEWIS

**I**t is a quiet morning. The house is empty save for our two resigned dogs—resigned because they sense this master will not be taking them on a walk anytime soon. They know it from my slow movements, which cause their natural exuberance to dim. This morning, I will not allow myself to be baited by their soft, desire-filled eyes. *Sorry, guys. The bed is just too cozy, and it's my day off.*

Suddenly the quiet is broken as my youngest golden, Maisie, still a puppy by every standard, dashes from my bedside and

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begins to bark indignantly. I can guess the reason. It is the bark she uses to alert all within earshot that some neighboring cow has trespassed onto her property. Looking out my bedroom window, I see a confused little black bovine, backside still raw with the telltale signs of a too-new brand, wandering along our side of the fence. Our offended dog will let this calf, separated from her lumbering mother, know her mistake. There will be no reunions on Maisie's front porch.

In the peace that returns after Maisie calms down, having barked the calf on her way, I notice the air smells of smoke. It is the height of summer now: fire season. There is a fire burning somewhere close. Too close.

The smell of smoke used to be one I liked. It is reminiscent of campfires and conversations, marshmallows when I was young. Now, though, I am too closely acquainted with forest fires. We've lived through three fires since moving to Colorado, but the Waldo Canyon fire that swept through Colorado in 2012, burning 347 homes and swallowing 18,000 acres of gorgeous forest, had come the closest. The hungry flames came within twenty feet of our house. The courageous firefighters and Vandenberg Air Force Base "Hot Shots" gave it up for lost, taking their stand across our street against the raging inferno. We evacuated in speed, shock, and tears, and for long minutes we did not know if we would live or die, swallowed up by flames ourselves. No. I no longer find the fragrance of smoke comforting.

Flames are licking all around us, aren't they? All the time. Saint Peter describes our life here on this earth as a "fiery

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ordeal" (1 Peter 4:12). Tragedies and heartache and pressures and illnesses and irritations grand and small show up indiscriminately, and they do not limit themselves to one season. I become very sick, but my husband becomes much more ill at the same time—and my children hit a crisis and the call comes telling us of a loved one dying and the letter arrives from the IRS telling us we are going to be audited and the plea for help arrives in our inbox from a friend because her son is suicidal and the deadline for a project is pending and another friend has found a lump in her breast, and all this occurs within two days.

Life is hard, and it doesn't seem to let up.

I know that in comparison to most, my own life has not been so bad. I am not a refugee. I am not living in the middle of a drought-filled land, praying that my child will survive another day. My daily reality is not set in a war zone (well, at least not one that can be seen). I am not living on the streets. I have a roof over my head. I have running water that will not make me ill. When I put my feet on the floor after a night's sleep, there is carpet underneath them. I am a resident of the United States and living a life of luxury in comparison to 90 percent of the human population. I'm very aware of all this.

But such facts, though true and humbling, don't help me most of the time. Too often they serve only to shame me and keep me from being present to the sorrow in my life that threatens to swallow up everything, like a forest fire that looms near. Too near. Yes, I want to be aware of others in the

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world. I do want to grow in compassion, but that will require me to feel my own pain, to not run from it through comparisons that only serve to diminish my own hard. When I do not have compassion for myself in my own trials, my compassion for others also goes down—both for those whose sorrows I have known in part and those whose sorrows I have not. Besides, the grace of God is not present in my comparisons. It is here for me in my moment. If I run from my reality, I also run from the presence of God.

So my heart scans the horizon in the quiet of the morning when the faint smell of smoke rises, and I ask, “Where are You, God?”

And the answer comes from deep within. “I’m right here.”

## Defiance, Not Denial

Our home had been overtaken by fairy lights. Christmas twinkle lights, boughs of evergreens, ribbons of red, and the fragrance of pine filled the living room. It was the night of our annual Christmas party, and I was ready. I’d been decorating for weeks. Even the bathroom had a little sleigh in it.

Once a year our team gathers in our home to celebrate all that God has done through our little ministry. We reflect. We give thanks. We feast. We laugh. And we get all dressed up to do it. Plus, it’s catered, so there’s that. It’s planned two months in advance, and as it draws near the expectation of joy rises exponentially.



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That year, I had a spare moment on the afternoon of the party before I needed to get dressed, so, as is often the case, I went online to check out what was happening in the world. Take a look at emails. Update my Facebook status.

When I did, I learned what had transpired that day and wept with shock and despair. My soul was filled with anger and deep sorrow.

A lone gunman had opened fire on elementary school-aged children, killing twenty six- and seven-year-olds in a terrifying and horrific spree. Six adult staff were also shot and killed. It was the deadliest shooting at any school in the United States. After brutally taking these precious lives, the gunman had committed suicide.<sup>1</sup>

I found my husband and told him of the tragedy. We wept and prayed together. Then, as we thought about all the people who were about to show up at our house, we wondered, *How could we celebrate life in the face of such wickedness and loss?*

And that's when the phrase "defiant joy" was born. We would not cancel the party. We would gather. We would not pretend that the shootings had not taken place, nor would we forget that a whole community was grieving the children lost, but we would proclaim that even so, *even so*, there was a reason to celebrate—particularly since it was Christmastime, when we gather to honor and remember the invasion of the kingdom of God. That's what Christmas is, you know. It's an *invasion*.

The battle between good and evil could not have been made starker on that day, and it looked like a victory for the

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kingdom of darkness. But we needed to remember that Jesus had entered the darkness and brought the light. His unending life signaled the end to the rule of evil and proclaimed the ultimate victory of the kingdom of God. Yes, a battle was raging, but Jesus had won it, and we were invited to proclaim it and enforce it.

Once everyone had gathered in our home that night, we paused and prayed and, in silence, honored the lives lost and the families forever changed. And then we turned our hearts to the One who is our hope in the face of loss and untold grief. Because of Jesus—His death, His resurrection, and His ascension—we chose to honor Him and celebrate that He has won and is winning still.

We feasted. We talked long into the night by candlelight and Christmas music. We lingered in one another's presence, drawing closer to the fire of each other's hearts than we might otherwise have done *because* of the pain. We were defiantly joyful.

Defiant joy is different from mere defiance. And it is completely other than denial.



April 26, 2001, 11:00 a.m. My mother had just died. Her passing was a holy one. My sisters, aunt, and I were gathered around her bed in her home, singing her into eternity. It was a precious and sacred time, made even more so by our sharing it together. At 1:00 p.m., the somber, respectful men in their

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dark suits came with a stretcher to take her body away. It was at this moment that the reality of our loss hit one of my sisters and hit her hard. She needed more time with my mother. Years of being physically and emotionally distant caught up with her. Now she refused to let the chagrined men do their work. They eventually had to leave empty-handed.

That turned out to be okay, though, because it allowed time for my aunt to take pictures. It must be a North Dakota thing. An old-world thing. I don't know. It's not my thing. My aunt carefully placed flowers around my mother's lovely departed self and snapped away. When forty-five photos of my dead mother arrived a month later, I wasn't quite sure what I was supposed to do with them. Frame one?

Hours after the terrified funeral workers left, they returned, stretcher again in hand. My sister would have none of it. The rest of us thought we might have to resort to drugs. Or a straitjacket. Whether those devices would be for her or for us, we weren't sure.

A body without the spirit does not linger well. My mother's body needed to be lent into the care of others. Fortunately my brother was in the house. Strong. Firm. Determined. And angry. He had chosen not to view my mother's body after she had passed on to her forever home, but my sister's pain forced him to. He had to go into my mother's bedroom and convince my sister to let her go.

It was with sorrow, with unabsorbed grief, and with a camera snapping that I stood by as they finally wheeled my mother's body past.

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What is one to do after such a moment but acquiesce to my aunt's offer to go get some dinner?

Okay. You betcha. Super. Besides, she had already chosen the restaurant.

In shell shock, we all piled into her car as she drove us to a teppanyaki restaurant. Do you know the kind I'm talking about? It's the one where diners gather around a common table while the chef awes the guests with his prowess with cutlery. Up in the air goes the zucchini. Down come the chopped spirals. I had no words.

There we were, reeling from the trauma not only of my mother's passing but from my sister's heart-wrenching grief, and we were supposed to be cheering for an onion volcano. Suffice it to say, we were not the chef's best audience that night.

I tell you this story in its somewhat macabre humor as an illustration of denial. Going to a festive dinner that night was very different from our Christmas celebration years later. One was honest, somber, and present both to the reality of the day and the reality of eternity, and the other was numbing and dishonoring, increasing our sorrow by diminishing it. We don't want to live in denial. We want to embrace defiant joy.

The evening after my mother's passing was simply not a time for cheering; it was a time for weeping. It was a time to allow our hearts the quiet, the rest, and the repose they needed to begin to absorb the loss. Beauty would have helped. A quiet walk in the woods or along the shore would have been good. But instead we got blades, flames, and suppression of

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the sorrow filling our hearts. Trying to diminish the pain only increased its potency.

Ignoring reality does not breed joy. Pretending that what is true does not exist is not holy defiance. The seeds of joy can only be firmly planted in the pungent soil of the here and now while at the same time being tethered to eternity. Joy is fully rooted in the truth. Joy embraces all the senses and is fully awake to the laughter, the wonder, and the beauty present in the moment as well as the sorrow, the angst, and the fear. Joy says, “Even so, I have a reason to celebrate.”

Crazy, right? Sounds like God. A God who laughs at the sneers of the enemy, stares suffering in the face, and proclaims with fierce love, “You do not have the final word.” And as He does, He captures our deep hearts with a hope that defies death.

*Defiant* may not be a word we would normally associate with the living God, but it can actually be quite fitting. Defiance means resistance, opposition, noncompliance, disobedience, dissent, and rebellion. And when it comes to things that would destroy our souls, that is exactly the right response.

We are called to resist the lies of the enemy. Like Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, we do not comply with the Vanity Fair offerings of the world. We are instructed not to obey the clamoring of the flesh. We are urged to rebel against sin. By the life of Christ in us, we oppose death and destruction. We dissent by casting our vote against the belief that sorrow and endless suffering win.

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Instead we welcome life, love, and the full work of Christ to bring all of His goodness into every aspect of our and His domains. We comply with truth. We obey our God. We respect His authority and His final say. We overcome evil with good. We defy hatred by embracing love.

We choose joy.

In the midst of all the suffering in the world, it can feel irresponsible, even frivolous, to have joy. And yet, and still, we are called to it. Certainly there is a time to grieve. There is a time to mourn. To wail. To sigh. There is a time to know our loss and not have to cheer the teppanyaki chef, but that doesn't mean we can't have joy even in that painful knowing. Joy is the heartbeat of the kingdom of God. Joy is what sustains us; it is our strength. We can be resilient. We can be filled with the expectation of good things.

And we can have joy in the midst of the lamentations of our lives.

## Joy, Not Happiness

What exactly does it mean, though, to have joy? I think we know instinctively that joy is different from happiness. Both are great. But joy seems higher, doesn't it? Better somehow. Rooted in more reliable things.

Happiness is circumstantial. I'm happy when I wake up and realize it's not Monday but Saturday—I have a day off! I'm happy when someone brings me a cup of coffee. I'm happy

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when I get a birthday card. I'm sad when a vacation is over. I'm sad when I mishandle the heart of a friend. I'm sad when no one remembers my birthday.

I love being happy. But happiness is unpredictable; it feels vulnerable because it is tied to my circumstances. And don't we all know it. One day you're up; next day you're down. Circumstantial happiness is an emotional roller coaster; it can really take you for a ride. It makes us heartsick in the way rolling seas and careening decks make us seasick.

Joy is something else altogether. It feels firmer, richer, less vulnerable somehow. I'm happy when my family goes out for ice cream, but it seems a little overblown to say I was filled with joy because of it. I was joyful at the weddings of my three sons. I was filled with joy over the birth of our granddaughters. Joy flooded my heart when a dear friend was cleared of cancer. I don't think it was merely happiness; the joy felt rooted in the presence of God. His hand was so evident.

Joy is *not* happiness on steroids. It is not happiness squared. Every healthy human being has the capacity to feel happiness, but joy is something entirely different, made up of its own unique substance. It doesn't come with the price of admission. Joy is connected to God and reserved for those who are tapping into His reservoir, who are connected to His life.

Joy is rooted in God and His kingdom, in the surety of His goodness, His love for us. It is immovable. Unshakable. Joy is available at all times, day and night, because God and His kingdom are always available to us. I'm ready to get off

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the roller coaster of happiness; I want my heart grounded in the higher place of joy. I bet you do too.

Who among us does not want more joy in our lives? In our work. In our marriages. In our relationships. With our children. In our quiet moments alone. If joy is a fruit of the Spirit (and it is), then we are meant to experience and enjoy it, regardless of our circumstances. Whatever may be swirling around us, the eye of the storm is joy. But how do we get there? The simple answer is we need to come to know God more deeply. When we do, we can believe and rest in His faithful, immovable, immeasurable love for us in every moment we are in.

Joy is the heartbeat of heaven, the very light that emanates from Jesus' heart, so as we grow closer in relationship with God, we'll also grow in joy. We'll see that He is not spending His moments wringing His hands, as we are sometimes prone to do. He is not braced against the future or overcome by serious hardship. His joy is never up for grabs. Rather, His joy is immovable, just as He is. It is an essential part of His very person.

Thirteenth-century mystic and poet Meister Eckhart wrote:

Do you want to know what goes on in the heart of the Trinity?

I will tell you.

In the heart of the Trinity the Father laughs and gives birth to the Son.



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The Son laughs back at the Father and gives birth to the Spirit.

The whole Trinity laughs and gives birth to us.<sup>2</sup>

We are born from the laughter of the Trinity. What an amazing thought. As image bearers of the Living God, surely joy is written deep in our very hearts. So it should come naturally, right?

Time for a confession. I am not a naturally joyful person. My battle in life has not been needing to be pulled back into reality because of my Pollyanna worldview. My battle has been with depression, ranging from debilitating to a mental-health low-grade fever; the struggle to get out of bed in the morning is one I am acquainted with. I know what it feels like to spend your days walking through sludge up to your knees with a heavy cloak on your back. But I also know the incredible feeling of having it replaced with a sense of hope and promise leading to a deep, untouchable joy. I'm learning. I do want to get off the emotional roller coaster of circumstantial happiness. I do want to be rooted and grounded in joy. Sometimes, though, it takes more intentionality to pursue it in our lives. Sometimes it's hard to take hold of. But it's worth it.

That's what I'm after. That's what I believe God is calling us to. It's what I am calling us to as well.



*Two*

## The Cup

*Dear children, let us not love with words  
or speech but with actions and in truth.*

—1 JOHN 3:18

Sometimes I feel as though I am standing outside my own life, looking through a plate-glass window that I cannot pass through. On the other side are those I love. I watch my husband and sons play with a freedom and ease of soul that is foreign to me. Their “otherness”—no, *my* otherness—weighs my heart down, frequently making it impossible for me to enter into their joy.

My immediate family is a close one. My husband and

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I, together with our sons and their wives, can talk honestly about matters of the heart. Difficult subjects need to be handled with care, but we are committed to the dialogue because we are committed to one another. And yet, so frequently, though loved and loving, I feel like an island set apart from their land of mystery.

I have also been on the other side of the plate-glass window from other women, noticing as they share glances and inside jokes of connection and friendship and wondering at their intimacy. Friends respond to invitations on Facebook to parties I was not party to. People speak of movies and books they love that I have tried to watch or read but, too often, after the first few minutes have shaken my head in dismay and walked away. I do not share many, oh so many, of my friends' and family's experiences.

I don't fit.

I'm outside.

Something must be bent and broken within me.

With my male family (even our pets are boys), I thought perhaps it was my femaleness, my estrogen an unknown entity to their overflowing testosterone. It was easier to think that. When my sons were younger, I thought perhaps it was my brokenness, my shame, or my being out of shape that prevented me from belonging to them in the way I perceived them belonging to each other. But as the years have passed and circumstances have changed, I still feel that unexplainable otherness.

I recently shared this with my husband and sons, about

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so frequently feeling like an outsider to my world, to them, even to myself. They nodded their heads, eyes filled with shared self-recognition. I was surprised to realize that they, too, were acquainted with that feeling in the different phases of their own lives.

In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens wrote that the people who teemed within the cacophony of London shared this feeling: “A wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other.”<sup>1</sup>

Oh. It isn't just me. It isn't just you either. Feeling “other,” feeling “apart,” feeling that we don't “quite fit” is the human condition. Loneliness isn't lonely. After gently unearthing a person's heart from the protective surface surrounding it, I have yet to meet one person who does not confess to loneliness.

We humans are a mystery. We are not meant to be a stranger unto our very selves, but feeling like a stranger in our world, even to those closest to us, is often a commonplace experience.

Feeling alone is a sorrow we share, and being alone is the first thing God named as “not good”: “It is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Yet we do feel alone. Isolated. Not understood and too often not wanted. It is not merely your condition; it is one we all have, and one that we feel compelled to run from. Numb. Escape. Ignore. It is a difficult thing to long for connection and meaning and live under a burden of futility and an emptiness that mocks. But when we run, we seed the fruit of denial and end up increasing our

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pain rather than soothing it. Hopelessness and denial may temporarily deaden desire and the pain of when it is unmet, but desire is a flame that refuses to be quenched.

Trying to do so never works and instead can too easily lead to damaging addictions.

As John Eldredge and Brent Curtis wrote in *The Sacred Romance*:

Whatever the object of our addiction is, it attaches itself to our intense desire for eternal and intimate communion with God and each other in the midst of Paradise—the desire that Jesus himself placed in us before the beginning of the world. Nothing less than this kind of unfallen communion will ever satisfy our desire or allow it to drink freely without imprisoning it and us. Once we allow our heart to drink water from these less-than-eternal wells with the goal of finding the life we were made for, it overpowers our will, and becomes, as Jonathan Edwards said, “like a viper, hissing and spitting at God” and us if we try to restrain it.<sup>2</sup>

We have an ache. It is a valid one. Of course we long to be endlessly loved; we are made in the image of a God who is endlessly loving. We ache with desire because we are meant for a life that is not yet ours. We try to escape the sorrow out of fear that the sorrow will smother whatever hope of happiness remains. We run to a quick fix because we know our hearts need fixing.

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The full list of happy quick fixes available would fill a book. Dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and endorphins are the quartet of neurotransmitters that make you feel happy, God bless them. Getting a text on your phone releases dopamine, and so does just looking at it. Maybe you were wondering why some people admit to feeling glued to their cell phones. It provides a happy jolt. So does sugar. So does alcohol. The list is long, and some of the items on it bear the potential for much more harm than others.

I love feeling happy. Absolutely love it. Who doesn't? But my pursuit of it has sometimes gotten me into trouble. I'm pretty sure it's gotten you into trouble too.

Sometimes I wonder if, in our mad pursuit of happiness, we run right past the joy that might be ours. We work hard to change our circumstances or change ourselves so that we might be happy. We get ourselves into addictive behaviors (exercise, by the way, is also very addicting; so is organizing your life). Then we work hard to get ourselves out of our addictions, which sometimes only makes matters worse. And all the while, God is right beside us with a gentle invitation to joy. But we can't hear that invitation while we are focused on whatever it is we think has to happen in order to make us happy.

If we want to live in the power of Jesus' resurrection, we must first pass through the crucifixion. We must stop running. Self-soothing may last for a moment, but that moment may become a doorway to a cell. Jesus came to set us free, and in Him we can be. But we will not be free if we continue to

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hide and refuse to face the bitter sorrow that must be braved in order to bear goodness.

Suffering is an essential part of all our lives. And it is when we are in the very midst of it that God reminds us that the absence of suffering is not our good. The presence of God is our good. And knowing His presence in the pain is the sweetest gift of all.

### And Then There's Paul

In the short book of Philippians—only four chapters long—Paul uses the word *joy* sixteen times.<sup>3</sup> Paul didn't write this book during spring break. He wrote it from a prison cell in Rome while he was waiting to be executed. In what should have been the darkest days of his life, he wrote the most encouraging book in the Bible.

Paul did not write from a position of denial but from a position of sober and joyful reality. Right there in his chains, he wrote about “the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things” (Phil. 3:8). Paul knew something; he *experienced* something. The word he uses here to describe his experience—his knowing—isn't theoretical. It's not knowing like you might know about the ancient Sumerians or the law of thermodynamics. The word is *gnosis*, a deep, personal, intimate knowledge. Paul had experienced God in such a way that even in jail he could find a very real joy as he fixed his gaze on Jesus.



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He wasn't faking it either; he wasn't living in some form of spiritualized denial. Here in his treatise on joy he speaks honestly of his sufferings (Phil. 1:29–30). He later describes being “poured out like a drink offering” (2 Tim. 4:6). Paul wrote his letters with an indisputable hope that burned all the brighter because he didn't deny his suffering.

Whatever else this means, it tells us that joy is available no matter our circumstance. Good heavens—Jesus went to the *cross* with a view of joy before Him (Heb. 12:2). As the psalmist wrote, “Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning” (Ps. 30:5). This isn't the Christian bait-and-switch. This isn't for “someday.” No. Joy is promised now, and it is our inheritance. There is a way to joy. The key is walking that way with our gaze set on Jesus, even when the way is dotted with suffering.

## The Great Debate

Everyone is trying to find their way to joy, and if not joy, at least happiness. That's a good desire, by the way: It fuels our search. It keeps us moving forward. Folks who give up even *wanting* to be happy are deep into what might be called depression.

But in Christendom there seems to be this perennial debate about how to get there. One camp, rising in popularity for obvious reasons, promises a life above and beyond suffering. If we just worship/believe/proclaim/whatever, we

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can live in the fullness of the kingdom of God right now! We don't have to be sick/poor/hurting. Victory is ours! There is a way around the suffering!

The other camp—often in reaction to these bold claims—tries very hard to say that no, the promises of God are mostly for later. The healing, the breakthrough, the victory is later. After you die. In heaven. Some of the advocates of this position are very, very dear saints, who, unable to find breakthrough, have made a theology of their own disappointment.

I just want to point out two things: First, suffering is guaranteed to the saints. Jesus says to the disciples and to us, “In this world you will have trouble” (John 16:33). Second, joy is clearly promised to the children of God *in this life*. Jesus said to His disciples, “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full” (John 16:24 NASB).

It's not an either/or situation, thank God. Because, as much as many of us have tried, we don't seem to be able to rid the world of suffering just by worshipping longer or praying harder or whatever the magic method is supposed to be. I believe a great deal of breakthrough and healing *is* available in this life. The history of the church is filled with such stories. I also believe joy and breakthrough are not opposed to suffering but are available in the midst of it. Suffering is not a failure of faith on our part; its presence does not mean the absence of the promises of God. We can live with suffering and joy simultaneously. How does this work?

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Joy is deeply rooted in the availability of God and His kingdom right here, right now. Sometimes we find breakthrough. Sometimes we find a deeper knowing of God in our suffering. But neither breakthrough nor suffering is ultimately the point. The joy that Paul discovered, the joy that Jesus knew and invited us into, begins in a deeper experience of God, whatever our situation might be.

### Jesus and the Cup

As we consider what it looks like to find joy in suffering, there is no higher example than that of Jesus Himself. Let's take a closer look at His final days on earth.

In 1 Corinthians 11:24–26, Paul recounted Jesus' words from the Last Supper with His disciples: "In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

This is when the imagery of the cup first appears. Interestingly, it continues to show up as the night went on. When Jesus and His disciples left the supper, they went to the Garden of Gethsemane, and Jesus mentioned the cup again:

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may *this cup* be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." (Matt. 26:39, emphasis added)

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He went away a second time and prayed, “My Father, if it is not possible for *this cup* to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.” (Matt. 26:42, emphasis added)

He left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. (Matt. 26:44)

“Not My will,” Jesus said, “but Your will be done, Father.” After asking God to take away the cup three times but ultimately putting it in His Father’s hands, Jesus continued down the path to His coming sacrifice:

It wasn’t long before a mob entered among the olive trees, searching for Jesus. They were, of course, being led by one of Jesus’ closest friends—one who had just enjoyed the final meal with Him. Jesus felt the cold, black kiss of betrayal as Judas’s lips brushed His cheek. He felt the ropes and chains wrap around Him as His freedom was taken. He heard the racing footsteps of the last of His friends as they abandoned Him. Jesus was completely and utterly alone.

What makes this scene so moving and tragic is that we probably each have stories of betrayal, isolation, and abandonment that we can relate to. We know to some degree what this feels like. And this is our God we’re speaking of—a human God abandoned, betrayed, and isolated by those He created.<sup>4</sup>

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When the soldiers came to the garden and Jesus stepped forward to offer Himself to His enemies, Peter also stepped forward and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. Jesus scolded Peter and told him to put away his sword. Then He asked, "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11).

What is this cup? Actually, Jesus had mentioned this cup prior to that fateful night.

Earlier, in Matthew 20:20–28, the mother of James and John, in typical motherly fashion, asked Jesus whether her nice, upstanding sons could have the honor of sitting beside Him in His kingdom. Jesus answered with a question: "Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?" (Matt. 20:22 NASB).

It was not a rebuke. It was simply a question, to which the brothers replied, "We are able" (Matt. 20:22 NASB).

It was a yes blithely given. Clearly they couldn't understand the full weight of what Jesus was asking. Jesus then turned to the other disciples who were mad that James and John's mother had presumed to ask such a thing. They wanted to be seated next to Jesus as well.

Jesus spoke to all of them then and said that greatness in the kingdom of God is not easily obtained. It comes along the path of love—a path of sacrifice, service, and suffering. This is the cup of Jesus. And the people who seek to follow in His footsteps must drink of it and become like the one who came "not . . . to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

## Can We Drink That Cup?

Let's take a deeper look into the fullness of what this cup means. Where else in the Bible have we seen the imagery of the cup? There are several passages that connect God's wrath with the cup. Jeremiah 25:15 tells us, "Thus the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: 'Take from my hand this *cup* of the wine of wrath, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it'" (ESV, emphasis added). Then, in Isaiah 51:17 it says, "O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the *cup* of his wrath" (ESV, emphasis added). In Revelation, an angel speaks, "If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the *cup* of his anger" (Rev. 14:9–10 ESV, emphasis added).

Jesus knew the Scriptures and was fully aware of this imagery when He prayed in Gethsemane with the cross looming so very near: "My Father, if it be possible, let *this cup* pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39 ESV, emphasis added).

We know what unfolds. We know that the Father did not let the cup pass from Jesus but required that He drink it to the full on our behalf. We know that the disciples were going to drink a cup too—a cup of suffering (Matt. 20:23). But Jesus' cup of suffering was different from theirs—and from ours—because Jesus' suffering was under God's anger. Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath, a cup that had accumulated

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the fury of God against all evil, every act of adultery, disobedience, murder, hatred, rage, offense, betrayal . . . all of it over all time.

This is the cup Jesus drank on the cross.

There was another cup offered to Jesus at the top of the hill at Golgotha. As He was suffering, the merciful centurion handed Him a cup. Jesus sniffed the liquid. It was wine mixed with myrrh, a mild narcotic to dull the pain. But Jesus knew He was not meant to dull the pain nor numb it in any way. He was to feel it. So He refused to drink the elixir. No denial. No numbing. He endured being fully awake to the pain so it might produce all its intended work.

Because Jesus drank from the cup of suffering and wrath, that cup became the cup of salvation. The cup of suffering became the cup of joy. Turns out, it's the same cup.

Hebrews 12 says that it was for the joy that was set before Him that Jesus endured His tortuous death on the cross. But to get to the joy, He first had to be willing to drink the cup of suffering. In the midst of His excruciating pain, Jesus fixed His gaze on His Dad and held on to the joy that He knew was coming to Him on the other side of the cross. He showed us that we, too, can have joy in the midst of our suffering because of the joy that is set before us—and no one can take it away from us.

“So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy.” (John 16:22 NLT)

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No one and nothing can take away our future joy at the grand reunion that is going to take place when Christ returns and all things are made new (Rev. 21:5). Endless life, eternally satisfying and delightful, is headed our way. Jesus led the way with His death and resurrection, and that joyful new life is promised to us as well. But remember, friends, to get to the resurrection, we have to pass through the crucifixion.

We will suffer, but we will never suffer as Jesus did—ever—because Jesus drank the cup of wrath for all the sins of all mankind. Though we will suffer, it will always be under a canopy of grace and love, never wrath and judgment.

This is the cup that Jesus invites us to partake of as He did. It is no mythic holy grail that we must search for in order to find eternal youth and infinite joy. This cup is real. We drink of it to remember Him when we celebrate the Last Supper, proclaiming His death and resurrection until we see Him again. We drink of it to proclaim as they do in the Episcopal mass, “The blood of Christ, the cup of salvation.”<sup>5</sup> We take up the cup to join in the fellowship of Jesus and all the saints who precede us with a hope that is untouchable. We take up the cup of blessing, and as we do, we sing as David did, “I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD” (Ps. 116:13). And, finally, we drink of the cup because we would not shun any of that which Christ deems necessary to shape us into His image.

We can rejoice over that.



## Rejoice

What makes a sinner rejoice?

When his sins have been forgiven.

What makes an angel rejoice? In Luke 15:10, Jesus tells us, “In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”

What makes God rejoice? When we come trembling before Him, giving our whole hearts to Him in committed love.

What makes Jesus rejoice? Let’s look at Luke.

The seventy-two returned with joy and said, “Lord, even the demons submit to us in your name.”

He replied, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you. However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

At that time Jesus, *full of joy* through the Holy Spirit, said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.” (Luke 10:17–21, emphasis added)

The scriptures say that Jesus rejoiced greatly. Another translation is that Jesus was exuberant (Luke 10:21 THE

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MESSAGE). He was exultant! Why? Because He passed His authority on to us. He shares His victory with us. We get to do the same work that He does. We get to share in the joy of our Master (Matt. 25:21 ESV).

What makes you rejoice?

Is it knowing the incredible sacrifice of Jesus, His willingness to drink the cup of God's wrath so that you will never have to? Is it His death on your behalf? Is it the fact that your sins have been forgiven? Oh yes.

We can have joy, because we can know God's strength in our weakness. Because God's mercies are new every morning. Because as we walk through this valley of this shadow of death, we are never abandoned or alone. Our God goes before us, and He is behind us, around us, and within us.

We can have joy, no matter what sorrow or suffering we are currently enduring, because we have been chosen by the Father and He will never turn His face away. We are loved. Forever. And nothing can ever separate us from that love.

We can have joy because we are engraved on our Father's heart and on Jesus' nail-scarred hands, and in Christ we are victorious. The suffering doesn't have the final say. In fact, God is going to use it for even more good to come into our lives.

James 1:2–4 tells us to “consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

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God is growing us up. He is committed to making us the mature bride of Christ:

And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Rom. 5:3–5 NASB)

The sorrow and grief that come are real, and we have a God who is well acquainted with them. He doesn't ask us to ignore our grief but to invite Him into it that we might bear it together.

No matter what, we can know an internal defiant joy because death has been defeated. Life has won. There is suffering, yes. But always there is the potential for joy.

In the face of the ultimate reality won for us by Jesus, we don't have to pretend that life is better than it is, that we don't hurt as much as we do, or that we feel happy when we are not. We are invited to be fully alive, awake, alert, and oriented to the truth, and to know that because of Jesus, we can be defiantly joyful.



*Father, I trust You but You know this is hard. I'm hurting, God, and I need You. Would you please come*

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*for me in this place? I don't understand why this is happening—yet here and now, I proclaim that You are good and that I trust You. I need Your strength, Your mercy, Your comfort, and Your help. I pray for the grace to endure and I pray that You would bring Your life and Your kingdom here. Shine Your light into this situation and bring Your healing and deliverance. Please, bring me more of Your presence, God. I am looking to You. I love You. I ask You to intervene. Fight for me, Jesus. Thank You that You have not abandoned me. Thank You that You love me. Thank You that You have good plans for me and that You are stronger than anything and everything I face. You alone are God. You are mine and I am Yours. So come, Jesus. Come. And use this to help me know You, love You, and be transformed by You even more deeply. In Jesus' name, I pray. Amen.*

## About the Author

Stasi Eldredge is a *New York Times* bestselling author, and her books have sold nearly 3 million copies and changed women's lives all over the world. A teacher and conference speaker, Stasi is the director of the women's ministry at Ransomed Heart, a ministry devoted to helping people discover the heart of God, recover their own hearts in God's love, and learn to live in God's kingdom. Her passion is to see lives transformed by the beauty of the gospel. She and her husband, John, make their home in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

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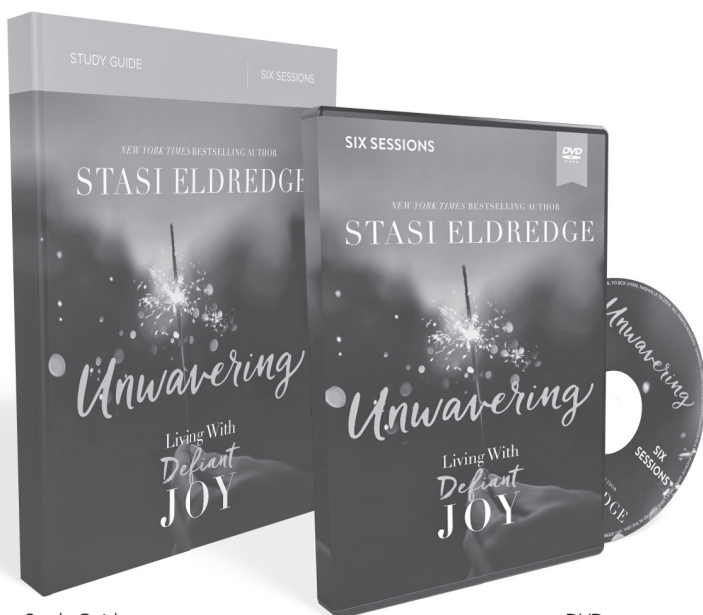
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