

The Beast

"When was the last time you felt deep, complete joy?" she asked. "You know, when you feel like everything is just about perfect in your world at that moment."

I'd already had several sessions with this therapist, and she knew a lot of the details of my life by now. She knew that things were generally pretty good. I'd had a solid upbringing, a happy childhood. I was married to a man I loved and who loved me, and our healthy, happy son was just over a year old. We had everything we needed. And yet, in five years, I could not remember a time when I'd felt deep joy.

I gazed at the floor, trying to come up with something. "Definitely on my wedding day," I said. "But that was over five years ago." I stared out the window, as if something out there would bring back a memory. "There must be something since then. Surely *something* when my son was born..." Nothing on the ceiling jogged my memory either.

"You're thinking way too long about this," the therapist said. "It shouldn't be that hard."

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It wasn't just that I lacked joy. As our fifth wedding anniversary came around, the picture was more grim than that. Too often anger and frustration with this circumstance or that offense made me rage inside. Sometimes I couldn't keep it inside, and I was downright ugly to be around. My husband bore the brunt of my foul mood. A few times I yelled at my son, but even when I held it inside I feared that he would sense my grumpiness and pent up rage and it would somehow scar him.

I wish I could say that I prayed fervently that God would help me find joy. But when I was seething with rage, I didn't pray and I didn't want to look to Scripture at those moments. My default nature, opposed to God, was firmly in control. I just wanted to be angry. Looking back I can honestly confess with Asaph the Psalmist, "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you." (Psalm 73:21-22) The only prayer my troubled spirit was capable of was a feeble "Lord, help me...help us..." breathed into my tear-stained pillow from time to time.

Only God knows how long I might have let this go on—and how bad it might have gotten. But he had a plan to turn things around for our little family. We were preparing for my husband's first deployment to the Middle East with the United States Air Force. I feared that our marriage would not make it through four months of physical separation. I feared that my mental state would prove harmful to my son's emotional well-being. And so I sought the help of a therapist.

The diagnosis was dysthymia—mild, long-term depression. I continued my sessions with the therapist. She coached me in coping strategies. I made sure I was getting sufficient sleep. I exercised regularly. I was faithful in my daily Bible study time. I read books about nurturing our marriage relationship and

worked to apply what I learned. I ate nutritious meals. I allowed myself to relax and be unproductive once in a while. And yet, the brute beast was always there, ready to rage if provoked.

Then one day the therapist suggested medication. I balked, thinking surely if I really trusted God—if I really had faith—shouldn't the certain hope of salvation bring me joy? My Savior loved me enough to take the punishment for my sins upon himself. Shouldn't that be enough to make me happy? Would I be relying on pills to solve my problems, and would that be a sin?

I talked with my husband about it. We agreed that if I did indeed have a mental disorder, it was okay to try some medicine. Besides, the time for him to deploy was approaching like a freight train, and if pills might help, we needed to give it a shot.

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That was almost nine years ago. I have been on antidepressants ever since, with the exception of my pregnancy with my second son. God has allowed me to experience joy again—the deep, complete kind. There are still problems in my life, and I still struggle. As a doctor once told me, “Medication can only make you normal. It can't make you happy *all* the time.”

I have also found that medication on its own doesn't do the trick. Regular exercise helps a great deal, and I need daily time in God's Word. I may end up taking those pills for the rest of my life. I'm okay with that. But I don't rely on the pills to solve the problems in my life. I rely on the Lord, who led me to the relief that the medication provided.

God told his people through the prophet Nehemiah, “Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” (Nehemiah 8:10) I have come to know that the joy of the Lord is my strength, even when I don't *feel* joyful, even when my emotions don't express what my soul knows. And now, by God's grace, I *am* often able to feel the joy he gives through faith in his Word.

Psalms 73, the one that talks about the “brute beast,” ends like this:

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.

God did not abandon me when my sinful nature was in control and anger and frustration made me rage inside. And thanks be to God that my husband loved me “as Christ loved the church,” (Ephesians 5:25) because he didn't abandon me either.

God waited until my spirit was quieted, and then in that still, small voice, he spoke to me gently through his Word. He showed me that his love is constant. Even when I am raging, his love is calm and steadfast. When I am a brute beast, he looks at me and loves me. And then he gently rescues me.

Prayer Suggestions:

- Praise God for his gentle mercy toward beast-like sinners opposed to him by nature.
- Confess times when you have allowed your inner beast to take over, or you have taken your anger and frustration out on others.
- Thank God for the moments of joy he gives. Thank him for providing solutions to our problems in all the various methods he uses to help us. Thank him for solving our deepest problem of sin and the punishment we earned for it.
- If there are people you know who struggle with symptoms of depression, ask God to soften their hearts to his gentle mercy. Ask that he shield those around your struggling loved ones from any negative effects of their condition. Ask that he make a way to alleviate their symptoms, by whatever means he sees fit.

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