



Lift your gaze from your to-do list and get to know the One who knows you by name. Discover the theological foundation for how we were *Created for Delight*, consider three *Robbers of Delight*, and learn five practical *Rhythms of Delight*. Discover joy-filled freedom to connecting with God.

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CHAPTER 1

Where Did All My Joy Go?

When did I become such a grumpy person?" I exclaimed, eyeing my friend over mugs of frothy coffee. We'd just parsed the most recent church scandal to hit the headlines, against the backdrop of growing tension in the American church over divided politics and post-pandemic policies. Like many young Christians in our generation, my friend and I were trying to make sense of realities unfolding around us.

"Oh, if *you're* grumpy, I don't know what that makes *me*." She stared me down with mock earnestness. "A curmudgeon, maybe?"

"Yes!" I smacked the table. "That's what we are. Curmudgeons." I nodded, and we sipped our drinks in silent companionship. After a few moments looking out the window, I turned back to her. "I don't want to be a curmudgeon anymore. It's so draining."

"It *is* tiring, isn't it?" she agreed. "Not just anyone can be cantankerous all the time. It takes a special kind of person to pull it off."

I grinned at her dry humor. “I mean, where do we go from here? If we’re curmudgeons in our mid-thirties, what’s left for us in our seventies and eighties?”

“We can figure it out as we go,” she assured me, a glimmer in her eyes. “After all, we’ve hit rock bottom. The only place we can go from here is up.”

God Gives Me Happiness?

I hadn’t always been grumpy. In fact, most of my childhood and into adolescence, people would remark that my face radiated joy, appropriately living into the meaning of my name: Asheritah.

It’s one of the first questions I’m asked after introducing myself: “Oh, Asheritah. That’s a beautiful name. Does it mean anything special?”

Indeed, it does.

I’ll spare you the entire etymology, but the short story is that my father made up my name, which is why you’ve never heard it before. And while it’s a tongue twister for baristas calling out my order—it’s *Ash-er-ree-tah*, like margarita, in case you’re wondering—I got to secure my own domain and social media handles, so there’s that.

The Hebrew compound word means “God is my happiness” and can also be rendered “God gives me happiness,” so I can’t get away from this theme of joy even if I wanted to. It’s a rich identifier that wraps itself around every cell of my being even as it’s a signpost along every part of my story.

I imagine my mother rubbing her pregnant belly, a lonely twenty-one-year-old political refugee walking the gardens of a crisis pregnancy safe house in Athens, Greece, whispering my name as a

blessing for both of us: God will be our happiness.¹

I imagine my father speaking the name over me the first time he held me, three months after my birth, having just escaped communist Romania and reunited with us: God is still our happiness.

I imagine the confusion of my American preschool teachers, trying to pronounce my strange name when calling me in from recess, unknowingly calling out: God gives you happiness.

I can vaguely recall the quizzical looks of my aunt and uncle and great-grandmother when we first moved back to a newly freed Romania as missionaries, looks that seemed to question: God is your happiness?

I recall the good-natured teasing of my junior high classmates, testing shorter nicknames, while I'd insist they call me by my full name, Asheritah: God is your happiness.

I remember the first time my high school sweetheart tenderly said my name on the grassy banks of a river, promising himself to me forever: God gives me happiness.

People spoke blessing over my life each time they said my strange name, so how could I not grow up to live out that beautiful promise? Except, that happiness began to dim, and people stopped remarking on my luminescence. I began to wonder: If God truly was my happiness, where had all my joy gone? And how do I get it back?

I don't know you, but since you're reading this, there's a good chance you're wondering the same thing.

1. I've always been fascinated by the ancient practice of blessing one's children. Names carry great significance in the Bible, conveying not just identity but also a powerful trajectory for one's existence. This significance explains, in part, why God intervenes to change people's names at significant junctures in their lives, as with Abram, Sarai, Jacob, and Simon. I believe how we choose to name our children has far more significance than contemporary culture would have us believe, and we still hold the power to pronounce a blessing over our children and grandchildren.

Remember Your Joy

Most of us enjoy at least some years of our childhood filled with a sense of wonder and delight. As children, we'd marvel at the puffy clouds floating outside our school window and imagine their shapes and the adventures they're drifting off to.

Remember losing yourself in the embrace of a furry friend, wrestling a puppy, or stroking the fur of a purring kitty?

Remember marveling at grown-ups' stories of epic adventures, hoping you'd grow up to experience the same?

Remember your childlike adoration of Jesus, caught up in the wonder of His love for the whole world?

Maybe you think back with fondness on the chocolate chip cookies your grandmother baked, the bike rides with your friends, or the sticky juice dripping down your chin at the annual watermelon eating competition. **Try to remember an early memory of absolute joy and delight: Where were you? Who were you with? What did that feel like?**

For some of us, that childlike delight stretches into our adolescence and early adulthood. And for some, the sense of wonder and joy leads into a naturally optimistic and joyful worldview.

Most of us, though, lost our joy somewhere along the way, whether suddenly (through a traumatic event) or gradually, as it wears out with age and the continual onslaught of global news, local community tension, and family fights. **As you reflect on your journey of joy, can you remember the last time you felt utterly enraptured right where you were?**

However long it's been, you've probably realized that delightful joy is hard to maintain on a daily basis because life offers plenty of hardships that steal our joy.

Three Robbers of Delight

I wish there was a way to avoid suffering. If I could give you a three-step process to ensure that you and your loved ones never again experienced pain, I'd do it in a heartbeat. But there is no guarantee, because suffering is a part of living in this fallen world.

At times, we might feel as if someone is conspiring against us, as if they are out to steal our joy. The Bible tells us that Satan is a thief who “comes only to steal and kill and destroy” but that Jesus has “come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10 NIV); and while that is true, sometimes our own decisions create circumstances that steal our joy. Sometimes, other people's choices and actions hurt us. But as we consider three common robbers of delight, remember that Jesus has come to restore what's been stolen and heal what's been broken:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners. (Isaiah 61:1)

Jesus is moving to undo the damage of sin in this world. As we survey these robbers of delight, I invite you to take a moment after each of these to reflect: Where have these robbers stolen your joy? And more importantly: how might Jesus long to move mightily in your life today?

Burdens

We all carry hidden burdens, like we're pushing an invisible wheelbarrow of sorrows, failures, and regrets that grows heavier

year after year. Our shoulders sag under the weight of unmet expectations, unrealized potential, and unresolved conflict.

Some of us carry the expectations of perfectionism, whether because of birth order, our workplace environment, or our own internal moral compass. Every misstep feels like a lump of coal added to the heap of failures in our wheelbarrow.

Others of us carry the burden of peacekeeping, navigating interpersonal conflict with perceived ease, but internally wrestling with the need to make sure that everyone else's needs are taken care of while our own energy wanes with the effort.

Some of us carry burdens of responsibility, like caring for elderly parents or special needs children, or just the regular demands of twenty-first-century life that seem to insist we perfectly balance a full-time job with regular exercise, nutritious eating, community involvement, and church volunteering.

And speaking of church culture, many of us carry the burden of trying to measure up to the unrealistic expectations of a "good Christian life": a daily quiet time, regular prayer hours, Scripture memorization, discipleship, evangelism, activism, hospitality, generosity, church attendance . . . are your shoulders sagging yet?

It's in a similar context of religious expectations that Jesus faced a crowd of people, weary and worn down by all they could not accomplish, that He says:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Matthew 11:28–30 (NIV)

Jesus invites those of us who are carrying heavy burdens to come to Him, to lay down our own burdens, and to receive His

rest. The rest that Jesus offers us is the very first step of rediscovering joy because joy can only flourish in a heart that's at rest. Jesus removes the heavy burdens from our shoulders and leads us in "green pastures," making us "lie down beside quiet waters," so that He might "restore our souls" (see Psalm 23).

For me, this meant embracing rest for my body as well as my soul. After consulting with multiple medical providers and hearing the same advice over and over again, I finally got the message: I needed to sleep more, eat nutritious foods, pause for afternoon breaks, and take daily strolls outside. It turns out that we were not created to be machines that power through fatigue, illness, and sorrows as if they don't affect us. Rest—physically, spiritually, and mentally—is not only an act of worship, but also the first step toward healing.

Only after we've received His divine rest does Jesus call us to a new pace of life: walking in step with Him, shoulder to shoulder in His easy yoke, carrying a light burden. We'll unpack the full meaning of this passage and the beauty of Jesus' invitation in chapter 13, but for now, receive Jesus' invitation to lay down your burdens and slow yourself down to His unrushed cadence.

Brokenness

The second robber of delight we may encounter is brokenness. Inevitably we'll get cut by the shards of this world fractured by sin and death, whether physical (injuries, disease, and addictions), emotional (loneliness, anger, and fear), or relational (marital struggles, friendship drama, and church hurt).

Some of us have been deeply hurt by those we were supposed to be able to trust. A deeply traumatic event casts its long shadows over the length of our days.

Some of us endure a thousand paper cuts from daily verbal jabs, leaving our hearts wounded and bleeding.

Some of us are physically hurt, our bodies deteriorating with age or disease, and every day we wake up wondering if we'll be able to function because of the chronic pain.

Some of us grieve the loss of loved ones whose days were cut too short. We feel broken, like we'd never be able to hold on to joy even if it were granted.

Thankfully, God doesn't ask us to fix ourselves before coming to Him. Instead, Jesus came "to bind up the brokenhearted," "to comfort all who mourn," and "to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, *the oil of joy* instead of mourning."² Jesus is the ultimate Good Samaritan who binds up the wounds of the person beaten up and left for dead.³ And to those who turned to broken cisterns for refreshment, Jesus calls out: "Let anyone who is thirsty *come to me and drink*. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them" (John 7:37–38).

Jesus calls us to Himself because He wants to personally restore our joy by healing our bodies, minds, hearts, and spirits. He does this through the Rhythms of Delight we'll cover in this book: Worship, Word, Whisper, Wonder, and Walk. While these don't appear listed as such in Scripture, they're based on Jesus' own ways of relating to His Father, and I've found them essential in my own journey back to joy.

In His infinite wisdom and kindness, Jesus does not allow us to walk through darkness alone. God surrounded me with friends to speak wisdom and to work out these rhythms together—we

2. See Isaiah 61:1–5 and Luke 4:14–30.

3. See Luke 10:25–37. Jesus laid His hands on each sick person who came to Him, and He healed them (Luke 4:40). It's by His own wounds that Jesus offers us healing, until that glorious day when there will be no more sickness, sorrow, or death (see Isaiah 53:5 and Revelation 21:4).

prayed, cried, and worshiped together; we studied His Word and served one another; we went on nature walks with our kids together. Much of the work He's done in my life has come through the hands and feet of the people He's placed in my life. He led me to faith-based practitioners who taught me new ways of nourishing and moving my body to partner with His Spirit's work to restore my health. He also provided biblical counselors who helped me process the hard things and replace broken soundtracks with scriptural truths. And over time, Jesus restored my brokenness to delight.

While this second robber of delight might be invisible to many, the last one has become unfortunately common.

Burnout

Some of us used to start the New Year with a fresh planner and ambitious goals—and even check off a lot of the boxes throughout the year—but excessive productivity and increasing responsibilities have led to continual busyness and eventual burnout. We dread facing our schedules bulging with commitments we'd rather avoid. We're burned-out on hyperactivity. We're burdened by non-stop caregiving for both elderly parents and younger children. And we feel a tiredness in our bones that no amount of sleep can erase.

A 2022 article from the American Psychological Association claims that symptoms of burnout and stress had increased 35 percent over the previous three years, citing physical fatigue, cognitive weariness, emotional exhaustion, or lack of interest, motivation, or energy.⁴

4. American Psychological Association, "Stress in America 2022: Concerned for the Future, Beset by Inflation," October 20, 2022, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2022/concerned-future-inflation>.

Jesus knows what it's like to be stretched to capacity, and He saw it in His disciples too. Surrounded by people demanding their attention, Jesus and His disciples didn't even have time to eat. He said to them, "*Come with me* by yourselves to a quiet place and and get some rest.' . . . So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place" (Mark 6:31–32).

I find it humorous and slightly relatable that the only place the disciples could get away to be with Jesus was inside a boat in the middle of a lake. As a young mom, I experienced many days when the only place I could get a moment alone was in the bathroom, and even then, my children would stick their little fingers under the door to get my attention.

Jesus understands. And He meets us in our burnout with an invitation: "Come away with Me." In the second part of this book, we'll look at five Rhythms of Delight that can help us get away with Jesus even in the midst of the busyness and burnout of our lives.

If you're wondering if joy will ever come easily again—or worse, you won't ever feel delight again—I'm here to say joy can be yours. I know because I've experienced it myself, and I've seen joy resurface in friends and countless women I interact with around the country and in our online community.

No matter how the enemy comes at you to steal your joy, Jesus always meets you right where you are, with arms stretched wide and a heartfelt "Come to Me!" Only Jesus can deliver us from these robbers of delight. And thankfully Jesus longs to restore our joy: "Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy" (John 16:22).⁵

Now take a few moments to consider: Where have you experienced burdens, brokenness, or burnout in your life? How long has this been going on? And how do you hear Jesus whispering to

5. See also Psalm 34:17–19.

your soul His invitation to “Come to Me” to restore you to healing and joy?

The Darkest Day's Long Shadow

I've experienced all three robbers of delight over the years, but one theft in my early twenties struck like a fatal blow.

My father walked out on us one cold January night. I held open the screen door, staring out at him in shock, his face partially illuminated by the kitchen lights streaming through the doorway. He paused, suitcase in hand, only long enough to disown me and tell me not to contact him. Then he turned his back and walked away.

The breath whooshed out of my lungs like I'd been gut-punched. In the span of a few hours, I'd gone from feeling like a cherished daddy's girl to a discarded doll, and I hadn't seen it coming. I watched my father's car pull out of the driveway, the red tailgates fading into the darkness as he drove away.

The rest of that night and the weeks that followed remain a blur. I remember collapsing on the couch next to my sobbing mom. *How did we get here?* I wondered, hugging her close and trying to offer comfort while reeling from my father's parting words. I'd suspected their marriage was crumbling, but I'd never imagined he'd walk away from *me*. I never thought I'd become a disowned daughter.

Little did I know that this dark night would cast a gloom over the decade to come, overshadowing my joy in unsuspecting moments.

God, how could You let this happen? Where are You in this? Don't You care? The accusations crept into my prayers over the following days, even while I struggled to quiet them.

I knew my father's actions were not God's fault, but I couldn't

reconcile the goodness of a sovereign God with the brokenness of my family. So, I held on to hope that God would bring my father back to us.

Breaking Down My Faith

Those first few months without my father remain mostly a blur. My new husband held me close as I grieved the loss of the larger-than-life man who had been both my dad and my pastor: the man who led me to Jesus in a Subaru one autumn night; the man who baptized me into the family of God; the man who taught me how to study my Bible inductively; the man who first trained me in public ministry.

He was gone, and his absence left a massive void in the heart of this grown-up daddy's girl.

My mom and I fervently prayed and fasted for his return. But weeks turned into months, which turned into years. And the yawning space left in his wake proved to be the testing ground of my faith.

Is this really real? I wondered, breaking apart the things I'd been taught about Jesus, examining them each piece by piece. *Is this really what I believe, even without my parents' faith to fall back on? And how do I rebuild my life when it feels like the foundation beneath my feet is crumbling?*

Ultimately, I didn't walk away—not because my faith was so strong, but because even in my wanderings, Jesus never left my side. He never let me forget the truth I bore in my very name: *God is my happiness.*

This isn't a story about recovering from parental estrangement. This is a story about Jesus' faithful love and tender presence even when your worst fears come true. It's a story about how God restores what the enemy has stolen, turning even evil into good.

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