

Entrepreneurship is best defined as “growing something out of what seems to be nothing.” This book is not just a story of a pastor or a church, it’s a virtual journal of what happens when God’s version of entrepreneurship is realized through a person whose apparent “nothing” is exactly what God uses to plant, grow, and create something truly glorious.

—Joe Schmidt, entrepreneur and founder of Freedom United, world’s largest anti-slavery community

It is rare that someone experiences such extreme brokenness in their youth and are so transformed that they go on to live in wholeness. It’s even rarer when that person can contagiously communicate that journey in a way that thousands more gain hope—transforming lives, churches, and communities through the hope and holiness of Jesus Christ. You will be inspired and equipped as you read how Benji’s story intersects with God’s story . . . and yours!

—Wayne Schmidt, General Superintendent of The Wesleyan Church

My friend, Benji, has given us a marvelous gift in writing *Wrecked and Redeemed*. Benji is a trophy of God’s grace. He is living proof that no one is too far gone to be saved by the rescuing love of Jesus! This book will inspire your faith and lead others to faith in Jesus.

—Derwin Gray, lead pastor of Transformation Church and author of *Limitless Life: You Are More Than Your Past When God Has Your Future*

If you want to read the typical story of a pastor, I’d look elsewhere. If you want to read something raw and real, I dare you to read this book. Sure, it will inspire and challenge you. But most importantly, I think you’ll end the last page full of hope!

—Ashley Wooldridge, senior pastor of Christ Church of the Valley (Phoenix, Arizona)

Benji takes us on a gritty dance between gospel and truth, between story and passion, between where the church is and where the church might be. Indeed, it is a timely dance, an essential dance, for all who believe the local church is still the hope of the world.

—Tom Harding, senior pastor of Alive Wesleyan Church (Central, South Carolina)

There is one qualification for grace—you can’t deserve it. The good news? We all qualify! In this book, Benji gets real and raw. You’ll walk away with a new appreciation for the amazing grace of God.

—Mark Batterson, author of New York Times best-selling *The Circle Maker*

If you have ever wanted to read an incredible story of life change, I would recommend this book. *Wrecked and Redeemed* is the amazing story of how God took a confused and hurting young man sitting in a six-by-nine foot prison cell and changed the direction of his life. I know I was inspired the first time I heard Benji’s story and I believe you will be as well.

—Steve Poe, senior pastor of Northview Church

Benji Kelley is the real deal. He is a winsome and living example of the power of the gospel to change a life dramatically and redeem it for a greater good. Read *Wrecked and Redeemed*, and be inspired and challenged at how God took a drug addict in jail to a megachurch pastor of one of the most dynamic multisite, multi-racial churches in America. Read it—and learn, laugh, and weep.

—Jim Tomberlin, author, pastor, and founder of MultiSite Solutions

Candid. Arresting. Inspiring. Challenging. Powerful. You are about to read God's story of how he rescued and transformed Benji. I have had him personally share his story at 12Stone, and obviously I am fired up that he has put his story to paper. Learn that nobody is beyond God's reach. Explore the depths of God's grace and truth. Incorporate these insights into your own life, and get this book into other people's hands. It's that good!

—Kevin Myers, founding pastor of 12Stone Church (Atlanta, Georgia)

Benji has a way of making the Word of God come alive to ordinary people, and in this book, you'll see why. He honestly, genuinely believes it! He has felt the power of the gospel in his own life which gives him confidence to apply it to mine and yours. Whether you are a doubter looking for direction or someone in despair looking for hope, you'll find what you are looking for in the pages of *Wrecked and Redeemed*.

—J. D. Greear, author, pastor, and president of The Southern Baptist Convention

Out of a broken life comes this classic story of hope and redemption, followed by God raising up a phenomenal ministry that is helping thousands of broken people find wholeness. This book breathes with authenticity and reminds those who read it that God is still in the healing business. Get this book into your hands and enjoy a front row seat at watching God perform a modern-day miracle!

—Dale Galloway, retired senior pastor and dean of the Beeson International Center for Biblical Preaching and Church Leadership at Asbury Theological Seminary

If you are paralyzed by your past or uncertain of whether or not God can use you in the present, then take the time to read *Wrecked and Redeemed*. It is filled with riveting stories, biblical teaching, and practical advice for every Christian. It is a book of hope. It is a story of redemption. It reveals and reminds us of the power of the gospel. The stories and Scriptures have the potential to change your future!

—Dave Stone, pastor of Southeast Christian Church (Louisville, Kentucky)

In life we often hope for things to be better—better circumstances, better outcomes, better relationships—but when things aren't better, suddenly hope is lost. *Wrecked and Redeemed* is a gritty and real story of how a young South Carolina boy found hope in the most hopeless and real moments of life. If you are searching for HOPE . . . this is the story that you must read. HOPE is on the way!

—George Franco, executive pastor of new**hope** church

WRECKED & REDEEMED

Finding **HOPE, FREEDOM,**
and **ACCEPTANCE in CHRIST**

BENJI KELLEY

wesleyan
PUBLISHING HOUSE
wphstore.com
Indianapolis, Indiana

Copyright © 2018 by Benjamin Wesley Kelley
Published by Wesleyan Publishing House
Indianapolis, Indiana 46250
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-63257-123-6
ISBN (ebook): 978-1-63257-124-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Kelley, Benjamin, author.

Title: Wrecked and redeemed : finding hope, freedom, and acceptance in Christ
/ Benjamin Kelley.

Description: Indianapolis : Wesleyan Publishing House, 2019. | Includes
bibliographical references. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2018041530 (print) | LCCN 2018054689 (ebook) | ISBN
9781632571243 () | ISBN 9781632571236

Subjects: LCSH: Kelley, Benjamin. | Wesleyan Church--United
States--Clergy--Biography. | Bible. John--Criticism, interpretation, etc.

Classification: LCC BX9995.W48 (ebook) | LCC BX9995.W48 K45 2019 (print) |
DDC 287.9092 [B] --dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018041530>

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www.Jesuslaughing.com.

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The **LIFE** *of the* **PARTY**

2

Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.

—John 2:10

INTRODUCTION

When God laughs at the soul and the soul laughs back at God, the persons of the Trinity are begotten. When the Father laughs at the Son and the Son laughs back at the Father, that laughter gives pleasure, that pleasure gives joy, that joy gives love, and that love is the Holy Spirit.

—Eckhart Von Hochheim¹

I love a good party. There, I said it. I love loud music. I love to dance. I love large groups of people and I love to laugh. I guess that makes me a party animal. I loved to party before I knew Christ and admittedly, I still love to party. I hope I don't lose you in this chapter. Stick with me. You might have similar feelings buried deep within.

A Runaway Olive . . .

One of my fondest, recent memories involves a wedding and a runaway olive, or two, or three. I know lots of pastors don't enjoy weddings, but I absolutely love weddings. Most of them, anyway.

I enjoy weddings because weddings are usually a party, a God-honoring party where people laugh, live, and love deeply. My favorite wedding was one that took place in Charleston, South Carolina, at one of those fancy Southern plantations, with large antebellum-style homes, surrounded by towering oak trees draped with gray moss.

After the ceremony, we made our way into an elaborate home and dining hall. The décor was exquisite. The candles flickered off the fine silverware, and white tablecloths were creased with starch and fitted to perfection. The food was delicious and the service staff were dressed to the nines in their black tuxedos with white towels draped over their arms. Everything you can imagine was on the menu: freshly carved roast beef, pork, filet mignon, salmon, sushi, vegetables of all kinds, gourmet salads, and decadent desserts. The environment was ostentatious and over the top, and I was loving every bit of it.

I made my way over to the amazing salad bar, and as I was returning to my table with my meticulously crafted salad, a runaway olive slid off my plate and onto the ground. Now, as a follower of Jesus, I concluded it was my responsibility to reach down and retrieve the runaway olive. That is the right thing to do, wouldn't you say? Right when I started to lean over to pick up the olive, out of nowhere, from behind long black curtains came a waiter who was moving rather quickly. Now that I think about it, "quickly" does not do him justice. He moved like a person you have seen power-walking down the sidewalk for exercise. You know, not fast enough to call it a run, but definitely not slow enough to call it a walk, either. In a flash, he swooped down, and without ever breaking stride, picked up the olive and darted back behind the curtains. I remember thinking, "Wow, that is stinkin' cool." He was like a ninja in the night. He was there the entire time, though no one could see him. He was hidden in the dark, obviously on runaway

olive patrol duty. It was remarkable. I started to walk away when I am slightly ashamed to share with you that I had this thought, “I wonder what would happen if I dropped another olive?” *I know, I still have so very far to go. Please pray for me.*

So, I looked around to make sure no one was watching, and when the coast was clear, I plucked another black olive from my plate and waited with anticipation. Sure enough, I did not have long to wait because, like the olive ninja that he was, he darted out from the dark shadows of the night, with his power walk in full stride, and seamlessly swooped down and retrieved the olive. It was, as they say, smooth as butter. It was amazing! I wish I could tell you that I only dropped one additional olive that night. It was a party of epic proportions and I was having a blast!

EXPLORE *the* PROBLEM

The problem with the church, in my opinion, is that we have allowed the world to host and have all the good parties. This is not good and tends to distance us from the very people we are trying to reach with the gospel. When I opened the Bible for the very first time in that jail cell, if I had found a stick-in-the-mud kind of Jesus, who was boring, overly religious, and as stiff and stoic as many Christians are today, I may have taken a pass and kept searching for love in all the wrong places.

Many Christians, and the churches they attend, are boring with a capital B. Is it any wonder very few people are interested in our faith or the churches we attend? The One who is the head of the church (see Col. 1:18), the Lord Jesus himself, was not a stick-in-the-mud kind of person. If he were, people would not have flocked to him, and he would have never drawn such enormous crowds. In fact, the very reason why people loved to gather around Jesus

on a daily basis was because they found in him abundant life, joy, and love. In other words, they found Jesus to be the life of the party—a God-honoring party with deep joy that superseded the shallow happiness of the day.

Many of the religious people who tend to struggle with dispensing grace also struggle with Jesus being the life of the party. That is not a coincidence. In John's Gospel, I imagine the people who threw to the ground the woman caught in adultery and wanted to stone her to death were still grappling with what went down at the wedding in Cana. No doubt word had spread around Palestinian water coolers, and the locals were gossiping about how Jesus had saved the day and kept the party going by turning water into wine.

Maybe it's just me, and the context out of which Christ saved me, but I deeply appreciate the fact that Jesus was not some religious prude. I would not have connected with the Lord if he had been this religious guy who never colored outside the lines. The fact that Jesus was willing to ruffle the feathers of the religious establishment was attractive to me. *Yes, I know, I have rebellious tendencies.* The fact that those on the fringes connected deeply with Jesus gave me great hope. The fact that people who were rough around the edges actually enjoyed hanging out with him was a magnet to my soul, drawing me deeper into the presence of God.

As strange as it might sound, in Christ I found a companion, because he too was someone that mainstream society looked down upon. He too was someone the religious people of the day frowned upon. He too often broke the rules. Now, please don't get me wrong; I am not trying to turn Jesus into a criminal or someone similar to me. And I am certainly not using Jesus to try and make myself feel better about all of the junk of my past. No, I broke rules and laws that resulted in harming other men and women. I was a bad person. I have confessed and repented many times. Jesus, on the other hand, broke religious rules for noble reasons and to

appropriately change the laws of man so that they more readily reflected the ways of God.²

Again, call me a rebel, but I appreciate the fact that Jesus knew what it was like to be looked down upon. He knew what it was like to get in trouble with the Pharisees. And Jesus would break a law or two in his day if it meant others could more fully experience the power and presence of God. Because of this, religious people often looked for ways to take his very life. Conversely, unreligious people who were far from God, people like me, absolutely loved hanging out with Jesus. Right or wrong, this was/is one of the primary reasons why I was drawn to Christ.

Let me be clear. **I truly believe it is a sin to take the greatest news the world has ever heard and bore people to death with it.** You might want to read that sentence again. The message of Jesus should make us some of the most joyful and vibrant people on the planet. Instead, why do so many of us give such a negative impression of what it means to be a Christian? This has to change if we are ever going to have a credible witness in the world today. Otherwise, we will continue to see interest in Christianity plummet and church buildings close their doors. Thankfully, John's Gospel helps us see how we might follow Jesus and bring a little joy to this party called life.

BIBLICAL *Exploration*

The most popular and controversial example of Jesus being the life of the party is found in John 2, a passage that bothers traditional religious people as much as any other. I can remember being in one of my first Sunday school classes, as a young Christian at the ripe old age of twenty years old, and marveling at grown adults arguing over whether the wine Jesus made was alcoholic. The teacher,

trying to build a case for drinking among a group of Christians that still favored prohibition, told our Sunday school class that the first miracle Jesus ever performed was turning water into wine. I sat there as a babe in the faith, flabbergasted by the way in which this one biblical lesson split that Sunday school class right down the middle. There were heated exchanges. People actually got up and walked out of the class, never to return.

This passage continues to irritate conservative religious people. Right out of the gate, according to John's Gospel, this is how Jesus begins his ministry. The party went down like this:

ON THE THIRD DAY A WEDDING took place at Cana in Galilee. Jesus' mother was there, and Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. When the wine was gone, Jesus' mother said to him, "They have no more wine."

"Woman, why do you involve me?" Jesus replied. "My hour has not yet come."

His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you."

Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons.

Jesus said to the servants, "Fill the jars with water"; so they filled them to the brim.

Then he told them, "Now draw some out and take it to the master of the banquet."

They did so, and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the servants who had drawn the water knew. Then he called the bridegroom aside and said, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now.”

What Jesus did here in Cana of Galilee was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him. (John 2:1–11)

Now, to really understand this passage, we have to know that miracles in John’s Gospel were called *signs* instead of miracles. John wanted to highlight the fact that miracles or signs pointed people toward the glory of God (see John 2:11). For John, everything was about glorifying God.

What theological point was John making by telling the story of Jesus turning water to wine and calling it a sign? How did this miracle point to the glory of God, and how should we let that miracle impact us as followers of Jesus today?

Weddings in the Ancient World . . .

Jewish weddings in Jesus’ day were much different from our weddings in the west. If you think weddings are a big deal in the States, you should experience one in the Middle East. In 1997, I embarked upon a twenty-four day Middle East Travel Seminar (METS) throughout the Holy Land. One night, as we were having dinner in our hotel, a wedding party proceeded through the lobby

and into the dance hall. What followed was an unbelievable, loud, festive party that continued day and night for three days. Even to this day, like in the ancient world, Jewish weddings continue day after day, many times lasting an entire week. Weddings were a big deal. They were huge, joyous occasions, with many guests: family members, friends, and townspeople.

At the wedding in Cana, Jesus turned the water to wine on the third day. Some commentators assert that this “third day” was a reference from the time of Jesus’ calling of Philip and Nathaniel (see John 1:43–51). I am not buying it. I think a stronger case can be made that the third day reference actually alludes to Jesus’ defeat over death and his bodily resurrection on the third day.

If the purpose of the signs was to reveal the glory of Jesus (v. 11), why was the first sign at a wedding? I believe this is a powerful image of why Jesus came to earth in the first place. According to other parts of the Bible, the wedding is a foretaste of the great heavenly feast or banquet that is in store for all of God’s people (see Rev. 21). Follow me, here; this could revolutionize how you envision Jesus and how his followers are to experience life to the fullest.

Weddings were a time of unbridled joy. They were long-lasting celebrations of love, not only for the bride and groom, but their entire community. They were parties that usually represented humanity at its best. Weddings involve love, commitment, life, family, and friends. Maybe that is why I find the pastoral responsibility of presiding over weddings to be so much fun. Many pastors resent weddings, and I get it. Weddings require Friday night rehearsals and Saturday commitments. They can consume an entire weekend in a hurry. But I find the best weddings are worth the investment because they are just fun and represent life at its best.

At this particular wedding in Cana, however, all was not well. On the third day, the unthinkable happened when the wine started to run out. Regardless of where you are on the alcohol issue, the

Bible is clear that running out of wine was a big problem. It was a major faux pas, a huge social embarrassment in Jewish culture. With the wine running out, the wedding was about to run out of joy and celebration, too. I submit to you that this is the actual point of the entire miracle.

Isn't this our story? If you are a born-again child of God, isn't this the story of your life? This miracle is definitely the crux of my story. The Bible says that all people are created in the image of God. That is, we are created for joy, celebration, and communion with God. Unfortunately, many of us have spent way too much time looking for love, joy, and celebration in all the wrong places. As a result of our fallen nature, and manifested in our very sin nature and outright rebellion, haven't we all kind of run out of wine? Haven't we all run out of joy and celebration at some point in our lives?

For me, it didn't take very long to "run out of wine." In seven short years of drug addiction, my life became devoid of joy and celebration. The party was over and had been for a long time. I just didn't know it. In order to feel some semblance of euphoria, I quickly moved through the addiction stages of drinking and drug-taking excessively. I was inserting deadly cocktails of poison into my body, just to help me feel normal. What used to make me feel good and give me a quick fix of shallow happiness and contentment, actually started to run out rapidly and I found myself taking more and more drugs not to feel "high," but rather to feel normal. Normal did not mean happy. As I said earlier, there was no joy and celebration at this point in my life. As they say, "Turn out the lights, the party is over." Joy and celebration were now dim memories of the past. I didn't know it at the time, but the wine was running out in my life.

When the wine ran out at this wedding in John 2, Mary approached Jesus. Notice that Mary simply told him the problem, not the solution. By the way, that in and of itself is a message. Too often I want to tell God how to fix my problems. My tendency can

be to not only tell God my problems, but while I am at it, tell him the solutions that I would like for him to provide. We would do well to stop telling God how big our problems are and the solutions we desire, and instead start telling our problems how big our God is.

Jesus looked at Mary and said, “Woman, why do you involve me?” (v. 4). *For me, this brings to mind the scene in The Incredibles when Lucius kept asking, “Honey, where is my super suit?” Sorry, but I couldn’t resist.* In contrast, Jesus referring to Mary as “woman” should not be seen as an insult. The Greek word for *woman* does not denote any disrespect. Far more importantly, notice Jesus’ comment, “My hour has not yet come.”³ Jesus’ full ministry was looking forward to a final act, a conclusion in which he would be fully revealed in all of his glory. Remember John’s Gospel is all about the glory. According to John, this future hour⁴ was the moment of his glorification, or in other words, his death and resurrection (see John 12:23–25). It is significant that Jesus, in the presence of his mother, already looked forward to the coming of his hour, even at this early point of John’s Gospel.

Jesus had the cross and resurrection in his sight from the very beginning. This, too, is part of the first sign, and it’s another reason why I believe the “third day” reference in verse 1 is an allusion to Jesus’ pending death and resurrection. In John’s Gospel, Jesus already had his sight focused on the cross and resurrection. He knew his service for the kingdom of God was determined solely by his Father, and here we are given a fresh glimpse into the purpose and passion of Jesus. Jesus addressed his mother as “Woman” and said, “Why do you involve me?”⁵ Make no mistake about it; Jesus was a man on a mission. Not even his own mother could interfere or intrude with what God was doing.⁶

Overflowing Joy . . .

In verses 6–7 the Bible says, “Nearby stood six stone water jars, the kind used by the Jews for ceremonial washing, each holding from twenty to thirty gallons. Jesus said to the servants, ‘Fill the jars with water,’ so they filled them to the brim.” The fact that Jesus asked the servants to do this is not trivial. It required of them great faith and discipline. Each jar would hold twenty to thirty gallons, meaning that six jars would equal 120 to 180 gallons of water. That is a lot to ask, especially during a wedding feast with so much else to be done. The fact that the servants obeyed is a testimony to Jesus’ authority, and, I might add, to that of Mary, who had instructed them to listen to Jesus in the first place.

As we read the text, we realize the master of the banquet knew nothing of what Jesus did through the servants (see John 2:9). According to the text, he is simply the person who objectively assessed the quality of the wine. The master of the banquet’s comment in John 2:9–10 represents the overarching theological point of this first sign. Do you see it? The master of the banquet says, “Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; **but you have saved the best till now**” (John 2:10).

Please don’t miss this. Highlight it, circle it, and underline it in red. **You have saved the best till now.** That is not just a reference to the best wine being served last, but more importantly, to the end result of this miraculous sign. The water to wine miracle is ultimately directing us to praise God the Father for waiting and finally sending his best, namely Jesus. In other words, this was not just the climax of the party in Cana of Galilee. The incarnation of Jesus has been and forever will be the climax of human history and the opportunity for every person to truly discover ultimate joy, peace, passion, and purpose. With Jesus, the best is always yet to come!

Doing a New Thing . . .

Keep in mind the stone jars were for the Jewish rites of purification. Through this detail, John is telling us that Jesus is the new revelation, superseding the old legal system. Miraculously, out of the water of the Jewish rites of purification comes the new wine of Jesus. The change of water to wine is the miracle that serves as a sign that the kingdom of God has drawn near in and through Jesus.⁷

This is what the prophet Isaiah was declaring so long ago when he said God was doing a new thing (see Isa. 43:19). That new thing was now being done in and through Jesus! The wine would soon be represented by his blood and would be infinitely greater for our redemption than any ceremonial cleansing. All this points to the “third day” of Jesus’ resurrection. The wine would soon become a part of our Holy Communion feast, representing the blood Jesus shed on the cross, washing our sins away and freeing us to enter into the true joy of the Lord.

The fact that God has offered us this “choicest wine” of salvation is the essence of joy and why we have reason to celebrate. Trust me: there is no drug or wine that can create this kind of euphoria. This joy comes from knowing that your past is forgiven, your future is secure, and the celebration begins here and now. Jesus’ blood, represented by the wine of Holy Communion, is what God uses to redeem, reclaim, and restore wrecked prodigals. Once a person receives that kind of homecoming, joy and celebration are the natural response. John 2 and this transformation from water to wine is about signifying the impact Jesus can have on people’s lives. He came, as John’s Gospel would later say, “that they may have life, and have it to the full” (10:10).

This is precisely what happened to me on October 23, 1988. Chaplain Jones came by my jail cell that day and asked if I wanted to become a Christian. To be completely honest, I had absolutely no idea what he was talking about. Remember, I didn’t grow up in

the church, nor did I know this Christian vernacular of being “born again.” All I really knew was that I was desperate and had tried every possible worldly pleasure in my search for joy in the parties of this world. So, in a place of desperation, I looked at the chaplain and said, “Yes, I think it’s time I try Jesus.” Right there in that cold and dark jail cell, we got down on our knees together and I followed his lead and prayed what has often been called the “sinner’s prayer.” Even to this day, I can’t fully explain what took place. All I know is that my life was wrecked yet again, but this time it was not a result of hit-and-run accidents or drug overdoses. This time, my life was radically transformed, kind of like water into wine, in and through the precious blood of Jesus!

APPLICATION

You might be wondering, “How does all of this impact my life? How do I tap into this joy?” Or you might be a pastor or church staff member wondering, “How can I integrate this into ministry?” Joy can be elusive. As a counselor once said to me, “It is hard down here [on earth].” That one pithy sentence helped me in a big way. I was going through a difficult, dark season in my life and had started to lose my joy and passion. The counselor was right, and I knew it to be true. It really is hard down here. This is a broken world. As our culture slips further and further away from God, planet earth becomes an increasingly difficult place in which to remain joyful. That is why this particular chapter is so important.

Happiness—swayed by our environment, those around us, and the pizza we ate last night—is fleeting and shallow. Joy, on the other hand, is deep seeded and can coexist with any hardships or challenges we might face. Regardless of our external circumstances, learning to embody the fruit of the Spirit, of which joy is a part,

becomes a work of the heart and an internal issue. It becomes a choice that we learn to make day after day, year after year, and decade after decade. One of my favorite writings is by Chuck Swindoll. It's titled "Attitudes."

WORDS CAN NEVER ADEQUATELY CONVEY the incredible impact of our attitude toward life. The longer I live the more convinced I become that life is 10 percent what happens to us and 90 percent how we respond to it.

I believe the single most significant decision I can make on a day-to-day basis is my choice of attitude. It is more important than my past, my education, my bankroll, my successes or failures, fame or pain, what other people think of me or say about me, my circumstances, or my position. Attitude keeps me going or cripples my progress. It alone fuels my fire or assaults my hope. When my attitudes are right, there's no barrier too high, no valley too deep, no dream too extreme, no challenge too great for me.⁸

Regardless of where you are today, take delight in the fact that Jesus is life. Jesus is joy! Jesus' celebration is greater than any illegal drug, academic degree, alcoholic beverage, prescription drug, career promotion, or sexual fantasy. Temporal joys often end with hangovers of regret. But Jesus is the true joy-giver and life of the party. Once we come to terms with the fact that Jesus Christ is nothing less than the ultimate life of the party, and he holds our past, present, and future, then we are well on our way

to letting the joy of the Lord permanently impact how we experience life, the attitude we choose, and how we create ministry environments for others. Here are a few points of application we utilize at new**hope** church.

Mickey Mouse Hands . . .

If you were to visit new**hope** on a Sunday, you would immediately sense unbridled joy in the house of the Lord. This is precisely what we hear over and over again, from people who visit our campuses and from pastors who visit from time to time. They notice the joy right away, and most of them just can't believe the church can actually be so much fun.

Visit any of our campuses, and the first thing you'll notice is a faithful volunteer standing at the entrance of our driveways, wearing a black T-shirt that reads, "Here to Serve," and enthusiastically waving large, white Mickey Mouse hands to every passing or entering vehicle. This gesture immediately brings smiles to people's faces as they enter our church property. It sends a very simple but profound message—this is a place of joy.

In the parking lot, they encounter people wearing bright yellow traffic control vests that say, "Here to Serve." Making their way to our different church buildings, people meet ushers/greeters, resource center volunteers, café staff, children and student ministries staff and volunteers, all wearing bright smiles and volunteer shirts with the same message. This is all intentional. It's our attempt to make sure everyone understands from the first encounter that this is a place of joyful service to the Lord and his people.

Worship Celebrations . . .

One walk through any new**hope** campus in the Carolinas or Kenya and you will immediately recognize that people are present, not out of religious obligation or duty, but because they desire to be in the presence of God and his people. new**hope** has become one giant party, week in and week out. We like it that way. We get this from John 2. We think it pleases God for his churches to be a place where people find authentic laughter, joy, and heartfelt celebration.

It might seem like a small nuance, but this is why we have never called our Sunday morning gatherings “worship services.” The language we use makes a difference. The words we choose impact how we experience life and ministry in the kingdom of God. Instead of referring to our Sunday gatherings as services, we refer to them as “worship celebrations.” “Service,” for many people, conjures up images of drudgery, work, toil, and the like. “Celebrations,” conjures up images of enjoyment, celebration, passion, fun, and joy to the fullest! Sure, we have serious and sacred moments in worship. We address serious topics in our preaching. But even then, we strive to strike a tone of joy. When all is said and done, we want our worship for all ages to be upbeat and celebratory.

The Gift of Laughter . . .

We intentionally try and give our people the gift of laughter. Life is hard. Life can be depressing. People come to church looking for hope and joy in life. We take seriously God’s call to try and send them away with that gift. We want to see people leaving our campuses with an added skip in their step and a smile on their face.

As a pastor, I have an unbelievable opportunity and responsibility to shape culture. I believe leaders in God’s church should learn to practice and leverage levity. There is a big difference between telling jokes from the pulpit and learning to practice a sense of humor in

the midst of the craziness of life. I don't tell jokes. I'm not a comedian. However, new**hope** is definitely a place of laughter. That, too, is intentional and it has been that way from moment one.

Life is both beautiful and brutal. When people frequent our churches, many of them arrive carrying baggage. Life has beaten them up that week. Their relationships are hard. Some have lost their jobs. Some have painful marriages, and others have just seen their spouse walk out the door for the last time. We take it as our responsibility to create environments that help lift the weight of the baggage, that bring healing and comfort to their brokenness, and that surround them with a community that cares. Levity and laughter go a long way in helping us create that kind of community. One of my maxims in ministry is that we should never take ourselves too seriously, while at the same time learning to always take God very seriously. In learning to not take ourselves seriously, we learn to laugh at the absurdity of life and the beauty of the gospel.

The Sacraments . . .

Similarly, we don't refer to the sacrament of baptism as "baptismal services." Rather, the outdoor patio in front of our Durham Campus has a baptismal pool with six water fountain features, where we host what we call "Parties on the Patio" four to six times a year. These are kingdom parties, and Jesus is right in the middle of it all, just like he was at the wedding in Cana of Galilee. We have loud music, food, drinks, fun, and games for all ages. At all our campuses, these baptism parties take place outside so that our surrounding communities can witness our celebration. We might not have wine like they did at Cana, but we have lots of joy, laughter, and life. In sixteen short years, we have literally baptized over 4,000 people into Christ. Can you say, "Party"?

Holy Communion and The Great Thanksgiving . . .

I will never forget the first time I received Communion in the church. I was nineteen years old and attending a flagship mainline denominational church in Sumter, South Carolina. *This church means so much to me. The senior pastors and student pastor discipled me big time. They shaped me in profound ways in those early years of following Jesus.* But my first experience with Holy Communion in that massive, flagship denominational church left a lot to be desired. I was so fired up to celebrate Communion, but what I received was more commensurate with a dirge than anything else. I was ready to encounter the resurrected Christ, but felt as though the church was testifying to a dead corpse. I was ready to shout and sing and celebrate; they were ready to whisper, mourn, and commemorate. Is it any wonder people are not knocking down our doors to come to church?

Interestingly enough, the word Eucharist (another word for Communion) in the Greek is *eucharistia*, which means “thanksgiving.” When we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion—when we break the bread and lift the wine—our hearts should well up inside because we know we have found the life of the party, namely Jesus! We can search all the days of our lives, up and down, left and right, trying to find joy in other places, but we will end up with more regret than we know what to do with. Or we can learn from this miracle of Jesus turning water into wine and lock into the real joy-giver in life. All other sources of temporal happiness are fleeting and shallow reflections of a deeper joy that is only found in Christ.

Do to Be . . .

Over the years, I have regularly used a simple principle called “Do to Be.” Many people often say “I don’t have a good attitude” or

“I just don’t feel joyful.” I understand that sentiment. It resonates with me on so many levels. I have those times of struggle, as well, when I just don’t feel it. That is why “Do to Be” is such an important principle that can radically change your life. Let me explain how this plays out.

Let’s imagine I wake up on the wrong side of the bed. If I have a bad attitude, I am going to make myself practice a good attitude instead; before long, even if I don’t feel like it, I often find myself truly having a good attitude. The same is true with joy. Even when I don’t feel joyful, “Do to Be” reminds me that I must practice joy. Literally, I must force myself to smile. There are times when I force myself to laugh. There are times when I force myself to praise God even when I don’t feel like it. There are times when I force myself to leave the confines and temptation of isolation and embrace forced community, even though I would rather remain alone. The amazing thing about this principle is that, before long, I find myself truly joyful, enjoying community, and praising the very One who woke me up that day and breathed life into my lungs. Try it sometime!

CONCLUSION

The truths in this chapter deeply impact how we model our lives and ministries, and how the church interacts with the world. The world is obsessed with worldly parties and looking for joy in all the wrong places. Once we let John 2 shape our hearts and vision for ministry, we will never again be content with status quo religiosity. Once the deeper meaning of Jesus changing water into wine ripens into a mature understanding of joy, leaders will cease to be content with long-faced, sourpuss religion. God never intended Jesus’ followers or his church to live lives of boredom

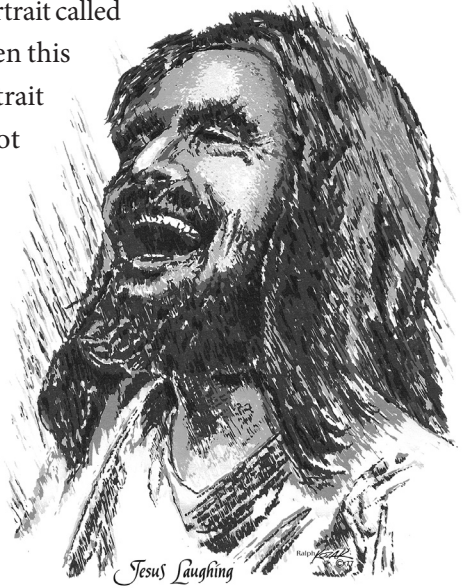
and dullness. The church should be the most joyous place on the planet. Christians should find ways to press through the difficulties of life and ultimately into the eternal euphoria that comes from Christ and Christ alone. This is why the Bible declares, “The LORD is my strength and my shield; my heart trusts in him, and he helps me. **My heart leaps for joy, and with my song I praise him**” (Ps. 28:7).

I believe it is high time the church shows the world how to throw a really good party. The twenty-first century is not for the faint of heart. These are difficult days. Mass shootings happen on a regular basis. Racial tensions are boiling over in cities throughout our land. The news of terrorism at home and around the world can leave us feeling anxious. Smartphones and social media deliver bad news 24/7/365. Flags seem to fly at half-mast more than normal these days. As the world grows darker and darker and gloom tries to settle in like thick fog, John 2 reminds us that it is imperative for the church to be a place of good and godly parties.

Please remember that Satan and all the dark forces of the world want to steal, kill, and destroy our joy.⁹ Jesus reminds us this is not acceptable for the people of God. We are resurrection people. In the end, we win! As such, we are called and equipped to dance, sing, and literally laugh on the grave of death, defeat, and dark gloom.

Christianity is more caught than taught. You might want to read that sentence again. The joy of the Lord is absolutely contagious. Once you get around God’s people celebrating life and the One who makes it possible, joy starts to spread and people are drawn near. I had a man tell me not long ago that one of the reasons he loves coming to new**hope** church is because it is the only time during the week when he laughs and experiences authentic joy. I found his comment to be troubling on the one hand, but incredibly encouraging on the other.

One of my favorite sketches is a portrait called *Jesus Laughing*.¹⁰ Maybe you have seen this piece of art. It is not your typical portrait of Jesus. The reason I like it is not because we believe it resembles Jesus (who should have Middle Eastern features, not ones reminiscent of a Caucasian West Coast hippie), but because it paints for us a more accurate and faithful presentation of the Jesus we find in John chapter 2. This depiction reminds me that Jesus loves to celebrate with parties and laughter. The church desperately needs that biblical vision of Christ. The world needs to see that image, lived out among those of us who claim to know and follow him.



You know, I had written the last paragraph and thought this chapter was done, and then I realized the weightiness of all of this. Maybe you are reading this and you find yourself in a bad place. Maybe darkness and clouds have started to settle in. I encourage you to put this book down and go to God in prayer. Maybe you find it hard to experience the light of Jesus, and instead your days consist of trying to find your way through the shadows of turmoil or depression. Maybe this chapter has helped you to see God in a different light. The Bible says, "Weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). Maybe it is time for your night to pass and your morning of joy to come. With Jesus, you can always rest assured that the best is yet to come. Before we go any further, why don't you ask the life of the party to come back into your life and renew your joy? Jesus is the reason and source of my daily celebration. Jesus is the life of my party. And he wants

to be the same for you. That is the good news—it's the sign behind the miracle of water to wine. I am praying for you as you lock into Jesus. He will give you joy overflowing. Trust me, the parties of this world have nothing on him.

One last thing about this passage in John 2 that is totally worth mentioning. Notice that Jesus instructed the servants to fill the jars to the brim (see John 2:7). The joy of the Lord is not a shallow joy. The joy that comes from Jesus is one that is overflowing. The choice wine was spilling over the brim, as it were, of those ancient jars. Similarly, when the pursuits of our lives start to run dry, when our parties become devoid of celebration, when all the things we put in our bodies leave us empty, if we will invite Jesus in, the *life of the party* will enter in, fill us up, and flood our souls with the overflowing joy of the Lord. Take it from me—I learned the hard way. Nothing will thrill us more than a life following Jesus who was and is the life of the party. That is what he did at this ancient wedding. That is what he has done for me. And, that is what he can do for you!

In a powerful and profound way, this wedding in John 2 is about my “wedding.” This is my life story. I had run so hard away from God, all the while searching for fulfillment. My dilemma was not unlike that of those gathered at the wedding that day. I had run out of joy and any reason to celebrate. That is, until Jesus reached down into my dark and desolate soul, and redeemed my life for his glory and purposes in the world. In doing so, he started to unleash his church in and through me.

The church God desires to unleash among us is supposed to be a place of celebration. Jesus is, without a doubt, the life of the best party around. This is why multitudes of people flocked to be around him. He taught them well. He made them laugh. He lifted their eyes off the drudgery of life as they knew it, and gave them glimpses of an eternal party; a party that begins on earth and even ascends to

a greater celebration in heaven. As a result, religious leaders could not keep people away from Jesus. Guess what? When we follow suit, the same is true today for Jesus and his church. As we learn to throw better parties in the church, people will flock to Jesus and his church, just like they did back then. Why? Because people love a good party. They might not always admit it, but deep down, masses of people love a good party, always have and always will. Jesus knew how to transform a tanking wedding that was running out of wine into a marvelous celebration of life and love. It's time we follow Jesus' example.

It's time to party!

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. Randy Alcorn, *The Grace and Truth Paradox: Responding with Christlike Balance* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2003), 87.
2. D. Moody Smith, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 39.
3. Smith, 37.
4. Smith, 38.
5. Smith, 39.

Chapter 2

1. Eckhart von Hochheim is also commonly known as Meister Eckhart, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meister_Eckhart, accessed October 2018.
2. See John 5:18 for a statement not found in this form in any of the gospel patterns of the New Testament. For this reason, the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Jesus, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath, but also calling God his own father and making himself equal with God.
3. D. Moody Smith, *Abingdon New Testament Commentaries: John* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 84.
4. In the Greek, *hōra*, <http://biblehub.com/greek/5610.htm>, accessed October 2018.
5. Ernst Haenchen, *John. 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 2, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 173.

6. Smith, 84.
7. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John: Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. IX (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995), 36.
8. Chuck Swindoll, “Attitudes,” (Insight for Today, The Value of a Positive Attitude, November 19, 2015, <https://www.insight.org/resources/daily-devotional/individual/the-value-of-a-positive-attitude>.)
9. Isn’t it interesting that, in the same verse Jesus uses to encourage abundant life, he also pointed out that Satan would love to steal, kill, and destroy, etc.?
10. Ralph Kozak, “Jesus Laughing” (Empire, MI: Praise Screen Prints), 63.

Chapter 3

1. Charles H. Spurgeon, *C. H. Spurgeon’s Autobiography, compiled from His Diary, Letters, and Records*, vol. 1 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1899), 113.
2. Stephen R. Covey with A. Roger Merrill and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 127.
3. Average church attendance, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html#sizecong and <https://factsandtrends.net/2016/02/24/majority-of-american-churches-fall-below-100-in-worship-attendance/>, accessed October 2018.
4. Ernst Haenchen, *John 2: A Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 2, (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984), 199.
5. It is not certain Saint Patrick penned this famous prayer, but much of history credits him with it.
6. John Wesley, eighteenth-century revivalist, supposedly said this to his circuit riders.

Chapter 4

1. Paul Harvey, <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/399662-too-many-christians-are-no-longer-fishers-of-men-but>, accessed October 2018.
2. *Jacob* means “trickster.”
3. I would like to honor and congratulate Jesse Henning, Cody Pyper, Dave Bookhout, and countless other new**h**oppers for their outstanding work on the original film, *Found*. Well Done!
4. George R. Beasley-Murray, *John: Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. IX (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1995), 60.