

“Three Pennies and a Rock” part 1 {outline}

Proverbs 3:1-8; John 1:9-13

September 26, 2021

- I. Introduction
 - a. Three Pennies and a Rock story
 - i. Picking my kids up at the car line.
 - ii. Could see Lillian, she was beaming.
 - iii. “Dad, today I had the best day EVER!”
 - 1. A new friend?
 - 2. A good grade on a test?
 - iv. “Today, on the playground, I found three pennies and a rock!”
 - 1. Thrust her little hand forward in the car.
 - 2. I almost cried
 - a. Happy to be a dad, sure
 - b. Long to be a child again.
 - b. Middle-Age has the tendency to leave us jaded
 - i. We see that some bad things seem to never go away
 - 1. Like arguing, government incompetence, superhero movies, death and taxes.
 - ii. We see that some good things never return
 - 1. Like civility, bipartisanship, humor and love of God within American society.
 - iii. *Wonder is oftentimes the very last thing we feel.*
 - c. Children experience wonder like nobody’s business
 - i. Ever seen a little child with a set of keys in their hands?
 - 1. As they twirl them around unartfully in their hands, their entire world can be found in those keys.
 - 2. As adults, we’ve seen keys a million times and we’ll see them thousands more chances are.
- II. Scripture
 - a. **Matthew 18:1-3** – “*At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*”
 - b. **John 1:9-13** – “*The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, yet the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him. But to all who did receive Him, who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*”
- III. Apathy
 - a. Story – Kids are rarely indifferent
 - i. One of my favorite memories of Ben occurred when he was playing flag football around 6 years old.
 - 1. Man, he was EX-CI-TED to be playing.
 - 2. He got out on the field, and just started yelling, “ROCK & ROLL!”
 - a. He was so excited, soon, his entire team was yelling “Rock & Roll!”
 - b. To us parents, this was just another sports events in what appears to be a never-ending parade of them.
 - i. But to the kids, it was the SUPER BOWL!
 - b. Apathy as the opposite of wonder
 - i. Apathy can be such a deadly toxin in our spiritual lives
 - ii. In fact, apathy, sloth is considered one of the Seven Deadly Sins

1. In Chicago – The Bulls story (1983 went to Chicago) One of Dad’s business associates exclaimed – “If the Chicago Bulls were playing across the street, I wouldn’t walk over there to watch them play!”
2. Imagine where this guy was about 4 years later when Michael Jordan arrived and the Bulls started winning?

c. Spiritual Apathy in the Church

- i. Only about half of regular church goers pray on a daily basis
 1. Nearly 25% never pray at all?
- ii. Under ½ of Christians read the Bible on a daily basis
 1. Nearly 20% never read at all
- iii. 80% of Christians admit they rarely witness for and to Jesus Christ.
 1. 2% are intentionally engaged in the work of evangelism
 - a. And we wonder why nobody is here?
 - i. Folks, it ain’t culture’s fault nobody’s here. Culture’s ‘fault’ is ours.

IV. Wonder

- a. What Lillian experienced that day several years back – “Look Daddy, I found three pennies and a rock!”
- b. Two Forms of Wonder
 - i. Amazement – “Awe-filled amazement”
 - ii. Curiosity – “I wonder why?”

V. Awe-Filled Amazement

- a. This is SOOOO important to developing a child-like faith.
- b. Just listen to a recent study done by researchers at the University of Minnesota
 - i. People who experience a feeling of wonder tend to:
 1. Feel they have more time available – feel less pressure as impatience dwindles
 - a. **Psalm 46:10** – “*Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations; I will be exalted in the earth!*”
 2. Are much more likely to volunteer
 - a. **Acts 20:35** – “*In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*”
 3. Experience greater life satisfaction
 - a. **Psalm 118:24** – “*This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.*”
 4. Favor experiences over the accumulation of things
 - a. **Matthew 6:19-21** – “*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*”

c. The Proper Response towards God is awe-filled wonder.

VI. Cultivating a Sense of Wonder in your Life – from Psychology Today

- a. Seek out Displays of Mastery and Wonder
 - i. In the Bible
 1. The greatest book ever written. Best seller of all-all-time.
 - a. 66 books across hundreds of years, one subject matter – God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
 2. This is going to be a recurring suggestion’

- ii. In Nature
 - 1. GET OUTSIDE!
 - a. James and the Great Outdoors
 - i. Move to Idaho
 - 1. Jason you hate the cold
 - 2. Science Articles
 - a. Particle Physics
 - b. Approach things from NEW ANGLES
 - i. Sermon on the Mount
 - 1. The Formula – you have heard it said, this. BUT I SAY THAT. Jesus is all about us trying things from HIS ANGLES.
 - c. Look at your life through someone else’s eyes
 - i. Dance recital story about awkward pre-teen girls
 - ii. Look at you from God’s point of view
 - 1. **Genesis 1:26-27** – *“Then God said, “Let us make humanity in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” So God created man in his own image in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”*
 - a. You are:
 - i. Loved
 - 1. **John 3:16** – *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”*
 - ii. Forgiven
 - 1. **Romans 5:8** – *“but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*
 - iii. Kept safe until the coming day of the Lord
 - 1. **Philippians 4:19** – *“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus*

Three Pennies and a Rock

Chapter One

It was nearing the end of the 2015-2016 school year. My two children were both at a local school and, as part of my domestic duties, I picked them up every day. As parts of the school was still under construction at the time, the normally difficult car pool line became excruciating. In order to pick my children up, I would twist through a long line of other cars. It was not a task I particularly enjoyed, to say the least.

Making matters more irritating, a few weeks prior to May, the children of the school rightly requested via large, decorated signs that as parents waited in their cars, they did so with their engines off. This was suggested for the sake of the environment and, rightfully so. Still though, it made the 20-minute wait harder as temperatures in the Carolinas that year rose up into the 90's.

Boy, was I elated when the line started moving as I could turn my car back on and enjoy the cool breeze generated by the air conditioner. Just as that happened though, I took a call from one of our congregants. It wasn't particularly bad news, per se but it was the kind of call which leaves one feeling, well, frustrated. Being still hot and now quite discombobulated from the phone call, there I languished in what I called "car pool hell."

Until I caught sight of my five-year-old daughter.

Now, obviously, the enjoyment of parents seeing their kids after being apart is manifest. At the same time, from easily 50 yards away, I could spot Lillian's radiant smile. Her grin coupled with the way her body stood energized demonstrated her joyfulness. It was infectious as I began to feel her joy radiating into my hot, anxious, irritated body. She was positively mesmerizing in her noticeable elation. It took an extra measure of effort to not just watch her as I pulled forward closer as other children were picked up by their caregivers and parents. The closer I got to her, the more I wanted to know. What caused such unmistakable happiness to overtake my daughter? I could hardly wait to find out.

"Did she make a particularly good grade on a test?" I wondered.

"Maybe she made a new friend," I considered.

"Oh," I thought, most contented with this projection "perhaps she is just super happy to see me!" After all, isn't the hope of every parent at some level that their child delights in them? (Save that question, we'll come back to it later.)

My excitement in knowing the mystery to this deeply contented little girl grew as I continued to inch forward to her pick-up spot. Finally, I was close enough. Benjamin climbed into my 10-year-old compact car. Next came Lillian. Before I even had a chance to ask her, she exclaimed "Daddy, I had the BEST DAY EVER!"

"It sure looks like it, Lillian." I said as she climbed into the back seat and took her spot in the booster seat.

Lillian repeated her first claim again saying, "Today was the BEST DAY!"

"I know, I know, I know," I said. "But WHY?" Before another word passed, my daughter thrust her tanned little arm from the backseat so that her hand was nearly parallel to me.

Her fist remained tightly closed as she uttered the following words:

"Daddy. Today was the. Best. Day. Ever. Because. I found..."

Never lacking drama, my 5-year-old daughter allowed the moment to linger, building excitement.

"Today. I found...."

She opened her little hand while saying "Today I found. THREE PENNIES AND A ROCK!"

There, in her little hand, was exactly that. Three quartz rocks and a particularly dingy, brown one-cent coin. I looked back to see her face as her hand continued to show me, and then my son Benjamin, her magnificent haul. There I discovered her face covered with an ear-to-ear grin whose radiance matched the sun in that moment of glee.

Finding three pennies and a rock made Lillian's day so bright that she, in turn was making other people's life just a measure brighter as the result of it.

Her particularly effervescent state that day is something I know I long for and I believe you do as well. I mean, wouldn't it be great to take such great joy in the very simplest of things?

How awesome would it be to be so energized by the wonders of this world and the love of God which fills it that you can't contain your enthusiasm, that it bubbles up deliciously inside you until it flows out into the world?

Returning you to a child-like state of wonder, peace and freedom from worry is exactly the point and purpose of this book. I do believe and know it is possible. I can tell you, by the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, I've had a great many such moments in my life. In fact, they're becoming, more and more, the norm as opposed to an oddity that it may strike you today as being. And, make no mistake about it, these wondrous and wonderful sensations of joy can occur in some of the most inexplicable times. No kidding. I've seen joy break out in just such measures at funerals, in hospital rooms where a positive outcome remains but a faint hope. I've seen unshakeable strength erupt as though from a volcano at the very moment when you'd think a person would quail under the weight of unfortunate circumstances.

Because I've seen the near-miraculous outbreak of peace and joy bubble up in other people during the most impossible circumstances, I also know it isn't a pipe dream. In fact, truth be told, this is not a book I would've dreamed of writing at the outset of ministry. The reason being that, aside from some sermon stories, I hadn't encountered this level of faith, in myself or others. Now though, I know so many people able to take joy in the smallest of things that I am able to write voluminously about them and their doings. I even cut a great many stories I wanted to add in. I want to tell you about the woman I know who, having lost a son to heroin, turned her own life around and today works as a medical professional. Should we ever meet, ask me about a man I met in prison serving time that today is married with children, working hard to take care of them as well as sharing the Gospel through his music.

God pulled upon the strings of my heart over a decade ago leading me towards the ministry. During the subsequent years, I've seen greater confirmation of God's miraculous abilities than I scarcely can imagine. In fact, I know that my pastoral strength comes primarily through seeing the hand of God move in my congregant's life. Once you start seeing these mini-miracles you realize, God is at work in this world. Better still this is a good and providing God that frequently uses the worst stuff life offers for the betterment of his children. It isn't that God brings the storms, it's that God can use even the wreckage of the storms to do amazing things.

I want that same level of strength and contentment. By studying these people and emulating what they do, lo and behold, I find myself resonating with joy far more often than it appears others do. What remains amazing to me is that these faithful children of God fall seem to have adopted a very simple, clear outlook on life. In a time and a place that is growing needlessly complex, it sure looks as though the happiest people are the ones who manage to navigate that complexity in the least complex manner possible.

Now that does not mean that these Christians are cave-dwellers or even Particularly pine for days of yore. On the contrary, these joy sharers oftentimes are able to manage difficult or even high-tech or medical related jobs. It isn't that they can't delve into difficult matters, it's that they're able to manage them maintaining a full measure of the peace of our Lord.

These people who've shown me such miraculous things have, I should add, one conspicuous thing in common. They've all been confessing, Christians. But beyond that, they've been active in their dedication to Christ as well. Generally, when I encounter joy on a level like I saw in my little daughter that day, I find it exhibited by the people who seem to always be at church and/or doing service for the Lord in the world. By the power of God's Holy Spirit, these erstwhile Christians are enjoying the outcome of their faith in the here-and-now just as they await with great expectation the coming, eternal Kingdom inaugurated by Christ's return in glory.

In a very real and sustainable way, these Christians of whom I'm speaking have been able to adopt a child-like faith.

I want what they have. Chances are, you do, too, even if you don't quite recognize it yet. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus Christ takes a few moments to tell his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." I think this is a word so many of us here in America need to hear, hear again and then, yes, hear yet again. Seems like we're taking everything too seriously these days, including ourselves. Somehow, amid the complexity of our daily life is magnified in this era of social media and constant access to newsfeeds. What we really need is a simple, child-like ability to process the world. Who can forget the book, "All I Ever Really Needed to Know, I learned in Kindergarten?" That book sold millions of copies because it reminded us that the most useful knowledge, we're given is quite simple. Easy enough for it to be absorbed by 5-year-olds.

That, dear friends, is exactly what we need. *A child-like simplicity when it comes to our faith as well as our daily interactions with the world and it's 7 billion other inhabitants.*

Now I need to take just a moment to share something obvious. These faithful Christians I'm speaking of. They're not perfect. None of them would ever deign to cite themselves as living an entirely Holy life. No, a child-like faith and sin can coexist in the same human. We'll talk about that a little bit further on. Just keep in mind, it isn't the nature of the person that causes the contentment, it's the active presence of God's Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit inhabits sinners. Why? *Because that's all there is to choose from.*

Jesus Christ himself shares with us in the Gospel of Matthew that He came "not to save the righteous, but the sinners." For that reason, it shouldn't surprise us that there is oftentimes a correlation between the depth of depravity a person sunk to and the blessed apex of their faith. People who've been enslaved by sin oftentimes more rejoice in their liberator Christ in a really healthy way.

I believe that it's possible. Not only because I know people who exhibit it on an ongoing basis but because, in following their ways, I've experienced a measure of it myself. Let me be clear though, while what we'll speak of is easy to understand, it isn't always a snap to do. But it is possible. And I'm willing to wager that if I can do it, you can too.

So let me make this abundantly clear right now – the aim of this book is to generate the same kind of zeal for life and its many blessings which my five-year-old daughter had as she delightedly told me she'd found three pennies and a rock. I know it possible.

Chapter 2

This orientation towards becoming "child-like" in our faith has, of course, the strongest Biblical endorsement imaginable. In the 10th chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says this – "*Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.*" And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them."

Now, if we're to take consensus scholars' opinion on the matter, Mark offers us the earliest dated Gospel. So, if we're to take ancientness as a factor to be weighed heavily in our thoughts, Mark having Jesus highlight children is significant. To be sure, there are a great many weighty matters for reflection in the idea that Jesus highlights the meek and the largely defenseless as being inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven. There is, no doubt, a thousand books to be written on the subject matter.

But here, our emphasis is upon child-like faith and that should not be overlooked. Add to this the awareness that in the first chapter of John's Gospel, we are informed "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..." This passage in combination with others orients us to a deep truth. *To embrace Jesus Christ is to necessarily become child-like in our faith.* Why? Firstly because, like children, we'll be seeing the world with a new set of lenses, so to speak.

Do you recollect the first time you ever saw a caterpillar move? Seeing it undulate up and down and the forward, it was surely a sight to behold the very first time you witnessed it. Nowadays though, you probably pass by hundreds of them come springtime, perhaps even lamenting them and the potential destruction of your vegetable garden. Something happened, didn't it?

Well, in a similar way, as we grow older, our need for greater and greater thrills inures us to the grandeur of God witnessed in a billion different ways right under our adult noses. But, returned to a child-like faith by the power of the Holy Spirit comes with the ability to extract a measure of joy and/or wonderment in everything. And, I do mean everything.

To be child-like in our faith additionally empowers us in what may seem to be an inverted manner. Recollect being a child. How many questions did you have? I wanted to know why the sky was blue and what sound foxes made. Every day opened up hundreds of new avenues for exploration.

It is like that to come alive in Christ. Wiped clean will be the false heuristics you've formed along the way and the aims and ends of this world, broken by sin. Best of all, you'll start wondering a great many things. My sense is these questions will inevitably lead you to wonder more about why God created you. Because isn't that also one of the great things about childhood? The ability to imagine what you'll be "when you grow up." I, like many of you wanted to be a firefighter, or a policeman, it really did depend on the day. Well, when your

faith becomes child-like again, you may well be 70 and retired but the same excitement emerges yet again.

Only now the query will become “what will God use me for to shine his light brightly in this world?”

Finally, and perhaps troubling to many of us, being child-like also brings us face-to-face with our dependence. After all, until someone teaches you how, you’re dependent on your guardians to do everything for you. Cook your meals, take you to the doctor, play with you. While this dependence becomes onerous to children as they grow up, one of the things that’s sacrificed is living a life largely free from anxiety. After all, when someone else pays the bills, handles the difficult work of managing a home and providing for you, life is much, much simpler. It has been my experience as well as the experience of a great many other Christians throughout the ages that simplicity yields a kind of peacefulness. Living in peace oftentimes surpasses our discomfort at being dependent.

Now, make no mistake about it, like children, there will be times we rail against being so needy. The sin of pride is lodged so deeply within us that we chafe at the idea of reliance on God. Oddly, we do so even after having previously experienced God’s peace in the past.

So too will we, on occasion, resent the fences God’s erected for us. By teaching us not to lie or be greedy to name but a few, the Word declares that there are rules by which this wonderful life should be played. In its simplest form, this code of behavior towards God and others is given to us in the Ten Commandments. Make no mistake about it, adhering by these commands is a difficult thing. It becomes harder still when you learn that sin, initially, makes things easier. Who hasn’t told a minor lie and discovered that it worked perfectly to get you exactly what you want? That feeling of false power grows addictive over time, sadly. Eventually, dishonesty will it come with every bit of the bumps and bruises which accumulate in the presence of sin.

In our ever-present pursuit of arranging our lives exactly as we think will yield the maximum contentment, we continue to sin even once we know that it comes with a steep price. It is in this we get the first glimpse of a sin-nature that cannot be defeated without divine intervention. Where this dynamic becomes especially burdensome is when we honestly believe we need something (or someone) in order to satisfy the incessant demands of ongoing contentment. There, too often believing that our ends justify any means we conceive of, we force ourselves mentally into a brutal and unnecessary choice – my way or God’s Way. Sadly, I think we all know the win-percentage between these two in our own lives.

But, given enough time, most will see that God never removes from us that which we truly need. For example, a few months ago, my 9-year-old son became infatuated with a new videogame called, Fortnite. Well, I wasn’t doing a great job as a parent and only realized after the fact that there was a level of violence attached to it which my wife and I weren’t uncomfortable with. So, away the game went. Believe me when I tell you, Benjamin was NOT happy with the adjustment to his freedom to play the game. I hope someday he’ll realize we did it to help him, not to deprive him of happiness. In fact, our belief is that NOT playing that game will lead him to a happier place, still.

In much the same way, being child-like in our faith will come with both blessings and disappointments. But, as long as we realize the truthfulness of Philippians 4:19. As Paul concludes this letter to the church at Philippi de does so, assuring them of the truthfulness of God’s Providence. Paul writes – “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” It is, to my thinking, the ultimate anxiety reducer.

Ponder this for a moment, if you will. God in Christ will always meet your needs, no matter what your situation. That’s not some kind of Pollyannaish optimism, it’s Biblical truth which is likely confirmed by your own life experience. Are you still here? If the answer is yes, which I think it surely must be if you’re reading this sentence, then God has NOT deprived you of that which was necessary for your growth and development. Now, certainly, there have been times when you were sure that if you didn’t receive fill-in-the-blank, you’d positively die. But did you? Following that, take a moment to reflect on what happened following the absence of what you were so sure you needed? Chances are another, heretofore unanticipated door of opportunity opened and/or you grew stronger in your ability to successfully navigate this world.

I understand that there will likely be some exceptions to this rule in your minds. I can’t know everyone and hate to enforce a world view upon you that doesn’t quite work. At the same time, with some insight and time, my guess is that you will see flowers emerging, even among the ashes of dearly beloved dream. God is still, by the power of His Holy Spirit moving, leading, guiding his children to the very place they most want to be.

Which, of course, is in Christ, child-like in our faith.

Dependence on God, casting all our cares and anxiety upon Jesus by trusting His promises leads to a reduction in stress level and will facilitate a return to the same kind of peacefulness children experience knowing their parents' will provide, no matter what. *Amazingly, lowering our fears through trust in God does not diminish our abilities.* In fact, it expands them. For study after study shows our brains are better able to imagine alternatives, see new pathways, and move forward on our goals when we are not anxious.

Imagine that. Being child-like in our faith enables us to maximally enjoy life while we are engaged lock-stock-and-barrel in serving others on Jesus' behalf and through the power of His Holy Spirit.

That day, as Lillian jumped into my car with so much glee as to be downright infectious with it, I saw a glimpse of what we could all become through Jesus Christ. Then, just imagine if everyone's heartbeat with one accord, to serve others. Can you just think of how much brighter this world would be? And those things which we truly need? They aren't huge things. They aren't, for the most part, largely even what we might expect sitting in our comfortable chairs staring at expensive televisions or laptop screens. The elements required are humble things.

Please don't overlook the smallness of the items which gave my daughter so much joy. When was the last time you even thought about a penny? As the smallest unit of our US currency, there isn't much it can purchase. When I was a child, 7-11 stores used to stock the bottom shelves of their candy aisles with "penny-a-piece" candy. Those days are long gone, as well all know. Nowadays, a penny can't do very much.

And what about rocks? Do you think much about them, either? Well, chances are if that rock is a diamond, you do but when was the last time you found one of those out on a playground? If you did, you'd probably start looking for the owner.

No, Lillian's little piece of quartz was an entirely unimpressive thing. The very kind of thing that stands out in the open for generations...until it catches the eye of a curious kindergartner.

Pennies and rocks are almost unnoticeable because of their ubiquity. Chances are you've got hundreds of pennies populating your life. Probably some jingling about in your car, dozens more in jars and drawers around your house. Rocks, too, are everywhere but, in their plentitude, seldom heralded.

So, the ideas we're going to talk about, I'm not going to lie, they're quite simple. I promise going in there's nothing here you haven't heard before. At the same time, I'm hopeful that, hearing them all put together, you'll seize hold of them all. Because, if you do, I believe you'll be well on your way towards the kind of child-like faith that not only improves your life, it improves the world.

However, before we start unpacking how to do that, I need to talk about a shadow path to achieve the same goal. I call it a shadow path because I fully believe that there are several false means of encountering childlike joy again. This shadow path presents itself whenever we come face-to-face with life, either its joy's or its problems'.

In those moments, we are often tacitly presented what appears to be an easy choice. Should I treasure this moment, or some moment in the past such that reliving those particular times becomes my chief end in life?

Since the future is unknown, we understandably have a fear of it when we're not reminded that God will be there with us there, no matter where we end up. It is those artificial fears, stoked by a world gone mad for profits, that burn us to embers.

While as you'll learn, I despise theology, I can't help but be reminded of the Westminster Catechism's first question. This catechism boldly asks – What is your chief end in life? The answer is as follows. "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." Simple, elegant, stunning. This, I believe, is a great synthesis of scripture's end – to inform how we are to live with God and other humans. Doing these two simple things (giving glory to God) and enjoying God's presence is much, much simpler than we might realize. This complication is exacerbated by all the theological clutter that eggheads have given us through the years.

Then the question becomes rather simple. If the Word teaches me that my two aims are to give glory to God and enjoy Him, what am I doing with my life.

Here, we look to children in order to find our path back to the Way of Jesus.

Let me return us back to our story to demonstrate how quickly this false way emerges as we travel the road of our lives.

As I saw that smile and the joy which painted it upon my daughter's sweet face, I encountered two very powerful feelings. The first was a desire to somehow capture that moment in time and keep her securely within it. The other was a nostalgic longing to miraculously go back in time and return to a pre-adulthood state; one in which the pressures, worries and necessary obligations of being an adult were eliminated.

To be sure, both of those are entirely fictional hopes though. Stop. Re-read those last couple of sentences again if you must. We can neither freeze time nor can we become children again ourselves. To try to do so, sadly, typically generates less-than-stellar outcomes.

I have seen no technological invention yet made that somehow stops time and allows us to live within the past indefinitely. That isn't to say that there aren't a whole host of people who want to do that thing precisely. However, my experience demonstrates that those people aren't, over time, particularly happy. Sadly, too often these nostalgia-driven folks make their own lives, as well as those lives which surround them, miserable. Quite frequently, "remember when" thinkers take on a hostility to the present day which leaves them incapable of seeing positive alterations when they arrive.

One quick example of this came by way of my best high-school friend's father. My friend John's dad was one of our favorites as we were growing up. While a great many of our parents were complete fuddy-duddies, John's father seemed to just "get" us. He'd gone to the state university as a younger man. While there, he'd been in a fraternity and, shortly after graduation, an ensign in the Navy. John's dad liked to talk sports and football and coeds and drinking. In fact, as we got older, he would happily turn one up with us as he regaled us with stories of his Kappa Alpha days at the University of North Carolina.

To the unenlightened, adolescent eyes that we had, John's Dad was the happiest man alive. In truth, he wasn't. As time would show us, this man had marital problems and a bitter spirit. In time, this man saw his business fail due to inattention and then one day he had a stroke.

That stroke would turn out to be the best thing that ever happened to him. I only know it because I ran into him many years later. Actually, I should say he sought me out after discovering I was interning at a large Presbyterian church nearby his home.

When the church's receptionist called and told me I had a visitor, I was surprised. I had nothing on my calendar. So, I went to the reception area with a fair degree of curiosity. There was my friend's dad.

Like Lillian, John's Dad had on his face one of those infectious smiles. Even though I hadn't seen or talked to the man in nearly a decade, he picked up the conversation just like we were old friends.

"Great to see you, Jace! Just over across the way dropping off some supplies. Brother John (his affectionate name for his son, my friend) told me you were over here so I stopped by after I dropped off some supplies for Haiti.

"For Haiti?" I inquired.

"Sure, let me tell you all about it...."

We retired to my office for the next hour or so as he told me all about Haiti and how it changed his life. I'll never forget his story as I think it gets at the root of why nostalgiaism isn't a particularly good life choice.

As we talked, John Sr. shared with me how he'd taken such an interest in Haiti.

"Jace," he said, "Life got pretty bad there for a bit. I had some heart issues come up, then I had a stroke, thankfully not terribly debilitating. But I was laid up for a long time in order to recover. Sally (his wife) was taking care of me and we let our young partner run our business as I recovered. Long and short of it was he stole our customers and bankrupted our company. I was so angry Jason that I wanted to kill the man. I'd sit around the home and I'd stew, and I'd stew. About the only thing that got me out of the house was going to church.

I didn't really like it actually, but I'd been going for 30 years and I wasn't going to change now, just because I was down. Then, one day, they asked if anyone would help back bags for our mission work going on in Haiti. I don't know really why, but I volunteered to help. Well, I liked it. Liked it enough to sign up to go over there

I'll never forget the look upon his face as he continued talking. I went. Oh wow, did it open my eyes. We've got it so good here, Jason.

He continued saying, "But it isn't that I feel more appreciative returning home, it's that I want to go back. I've made so many Haitian friends, some days I think I'd rather be there than here.

But here's where he blew me away. And while I may not be able to record his words precisely, I am definitely capturing what he meant. He said to me something to the effect of "by the time I hit 35, I felt life passed me by. I could remember those days at the fraternity house or in the Navy and all I really wanted to do was go back to them. I didn't realize it, but it closed me off from so many neat, new things. Haiti awakened me from a long slumber. When I go there, when I help with the mission teams, as I talk to my friends there, I feel alive in a way I haven't since I was 22."

It took my friend's father until well into his 70's to shed the desire to go back in time and make as many things as possible like they were in the 60's in the here-and-now.

As a general rule, the pathway to joy rarely runs backwards for long. Sometimes we do come into a season in which some reflection and thought on the past is helpful. But this return to yesteryear is only beneficial to us and others if it is an exploration with an aim to make the future brighter. If it hangs up in seeing you take reactionary stands, then you're quite possibly fetishizing the past. Now look, to those who are inclined to believe the past was better, I'm not here to argue. To be sure, some aspects of the past were much more beneficial. A great many were not, though. But even beyond a discussion of conservatism versus progressivism is the stark reality. Time isn't some malleable thing where we can spin the hands of an old-style clock and thereby reverse the present and retreat into the past.

Because here's the thing – while nostalgia for the past initially warms our hearts, that wave often crashes upon the shores of regret. Part of mechanism of glorifying the past makes us inquire as to how things became how they are. Nine times out of ten, the only space for this inquiry to go is to those personal decisions, an action which led away from the halcyon days of your past.

John's dad is a type you're bound to run into if it's not operating within you, thus rendering you blind to it in others. In my experience as a pastor, I've met tons of people burning with a yearning for the past and they always seem to be laden with regret. Regret reaps bitter fruit, sadly. And so, while you may want to encounter pleasurable feelings from the past, it isn't a healthy practice to stay there.

In actuality, the more difficult, obstreperous and mean-spirited person is, the more likely it is that they've located their bliss in days gone by. If you're always looking backwards, you're not able to appreciate the present. As much as God's presence is with us now. As in this very moment. While pleasant to remember your care-free days, it is far more enjoyable to be in the here-and-now because in this moment, you're joined by the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

My friend John's Dad moved from "nostalgiaism" to Christian action. There are many who don't. A congregant used to repeat over and over that "he should've stayed in the Navy." The man would then go on, "There was order. Rules. I would've made Captain and retired on a great military pension." Such a declaration could be entirely true. Yet that wasn't the path the man charted. In fact, he'd chosen to marry his childhood sweetheart and return home. There, he and his wife had three children who adored him. Grandkids everything. Still though, the man had a hard edge about him. Hated certain groups of people. My sense is that he was so caught up in this fantasy life that didn't happen that hardness encrusted around his heart. It really robbed him of a lot of contentment, I think.

How?

Because he romanticized the past so much, he didn't really appreciate what life did bring him.

That's the biggest part of nostalgiaism. It makes us imagine a perfect life which we then become envious of in comparison to our actual life. But look. The perfect life you IMAGINE probably is a figment of your imagination. Would the man have become captain? Maybe. But it's also likely that in the downsizing of the 80's and 90's, such a dream never would've been fulfilled. Further, for all anyone knows, he could've died in a conflict or an accident, never having gotten to spend all those years with his adoring family.

Before we really begin our journey, take a moment to consider if you have some "grass-is-always-greener" fantasy spinning around in your mind like a gerbil on an exercise wheel. It's been my experience that regret runs counter to our purposes. To be sure, there are going to be events, occasions and choices that we wish had turned out differently. At the same time, if we continue to play that tape over and over again in our minds, it's sapping us of the mental energy to truly enjoy our present.

Putting to rest an unhealthy vision of a perfect life path that didn't emerge is best undertaken in prayer. One exercise I frequently suggest when regret lodges in our hearts is journaling. Specifically, I ask a client to write

out their vision of how life “should have” turned out. I encourage them to go “all in.” To really spell-out what they believe would’ve happened if, for example, they’d stayed in the Navy or their spouse hadn’t left them for someone else. Just about every time, when these entries are returned, it becomes easy to see just how preposterous they were. Then, sitting with them and their letter, we question the likelihood such a path would’ve ever happened. Then, we start imagining the stuff they would lose from their current existence.

For example, I dated a girl I was crazy about in my 20’s. However, my terrible immaturity coupled with a deep incompatibility led to the demise of that relationship. Sad to say, I spent a great many years in sorrow over that loss.

But it was the loss of that relationship which ultimately led me back to college and then, into the ministry. Had I not encountered such an abrupt ending to my first “love” relationship, I may never have met my current wife, to say nothing of these awesome kids the Lord’s blessed us with.

Whenever I think, “Wouldn’t it have been great if...” I prayerfully ask God to help me see with his eyesight. From that perspective, I am much more grateful for what transpired. I then no longer want to retrace the past with a pining heart.

This is a dynamic that I experience with people I’m counselling all the time. When pressed between their fantastical vision of how life could’ve been versus how life actually is, most see a measure of fulfillment they wouldn’t want taken away under any circumstances, let alone improbable ones.

Returning back to the past with the hopes of reliving your life is unhealthy for your spiritual growth. So too is trying to remain in the past using any means necessary.

Just about everyone knows someone that is doing everything they can to keep things exactly as they were. Perhaps you experience this in a woman that undertakes frequent plastic surgeries to remain youthful looking. Maybe you’ve met men who lecherously prey upon younger women for no better reason than to feel young again.

In the attempt to live as happily as Lillian was that day with her three pennies and a rock, there is a large segment of people who simply try to remain oblivious to the passing of time. In a way, these Peter Pans never really want to grow up.

But such a delayed development doesn’t generally work out too well. I think here about a young man I met. For a reason which defies explanation, this man’s grandfather gave him nearly a million dollars when he turned 18. This money wasn’t given in a trust where some supervision apparatus would’ve been attached. No, this grandfather gave the 18-year-old this amazing sum of money directly. The money went from the grandfather’s account into the young man’s one clear shining day. I’m certain the kindly older man believed this would enable his grandson to do amazing things.

It didn’t. In fact, this young man literally blew the money in about five years. Then, having squandered the money, he returned home. Amazingly, his grandfather gave him another half-million dollars. I’m sure there was some promise of doing better attached but, alas, it didn’t happen.

Along the way, the young man told me about some of his great accomplishments. One saw him purchase a fabulously expensive Bugatti motorcycle which he then wrecked within the first week speeding. To make matters worse, the crash caused him to be in the hospital and endure physical therapy. But, according to him, the day they released him from care, he returned to the Bugatti dealership and purchased another of these bikes. Not with insurance money. With his own stash.

There were other stories like this as well. It became clear that this massive wealth enabled him to stay far removed from adult responsibilities and expectations. But I wonder, was that good for him?

I’d say the answer was very clearly, “no.” I met him after his parents requested me to visit with him. The young man’s father told me, prior to my visit, that his house was “filthy.” Eventually, his money ran out. He had to return home yet again. Only this time, his grandfather had passed. There was no money left to give. Thankfully, his father was able to buy him a house with the hopes that, with the money gone, he’d finally grow up.

But it didn’t work out that way.

The now 32-year old’s house was indeed filthy. Trash accumulated everywhere, piling up even on tables and chairs. The house his father put him in smelled strongly of urine as he’d degenerated to the point that he wasn’t taking his dogs out for bathroom breaks.

Here, right under his nose, stood a powerful incentive for him to “grow up.” Yet, at the time, he preferred imagining a world in which he’d win the lottery or his “music” would enable him to return to a life of posh enjoyment. Instead of pushing forward into adulthood, he chose to remain trapped in a fantasy world.

While this is an obviously overblown example, the idea that avoiding reality is the only means by which we can encounter God’s joy is equally as invalid as nostalgiaism. God’s greatest joy doesn’t dwell in even the most richly detailed fantasy world. Thanks to God’s great blessing of thought and imagination, I can conceive of some fantastic fantasy worlds.

Personally, I imagine calorie-free pizza, world peace and an eternal end to Julie from cardmember services. Yet as cool as that world is, it isn’t nearly as neat as the one, real, objective reality I’m currently enmeshed in. Why? Because God dwells here, not in my imaginative life. That isn’t to say that God can’t inspire through our imaginations amazing things. What it does claim is that God’s richest blessings, the most amazing displays of his providence and might occur here, in the quote-unquote “real” world.

If your hope for happiness, joyousness and freedom exists only when you turn off your adult mind, you’ve got a problem. Relax though, it isn’t an insurmountable one. Just like with Lillian, the best blessings are probably right under your noses. We just need to get you to the point where you see them as clearly as others do.

Part of that process will include helping others but it will also include getting to know a great deal more about this God that need not exist solely in your fantasy life. In fact, it could be that you’re wrongly employing your God-given imagination to “fill in” for what you don’t believe God can do. Let me put that another way. Sometimes, we choose to imagine winning the lottery or receiving some other sort of amazing windfall as the means to perpetuate our dreams. But, sorry to say, that really isn’t the point of this life. If we’re all out trying to realize our own, self-inspired dreams, this world will quickly fill with the noxious air of our self-absorption. Instead, we’re called to align our dreams with God’s hopes which are coming into fruition even now by the power of His Holy Spirit. Instead of imagining winning the lottery, perhaps choose to believe in a God that can accomplish anything. Instead of trying to avoid adult responsibilities, embrace God’s mission to make disciples. Never choose to dwell too long in a fantasy world of your own creation when the entirety of who you are (body, soul and mind) already exists within an amazingly good creation of an unfathomably good God.

Part of the task required by maturing into an adult life faith necessarily means shedding our immaturity. In order to do that, one must, by the power of God’s Spirit, turn away from unhealthy attempts to freeze time, so to speak. Choosing to remain in a reality that exists only between our own ears doesn’t lead to the kind of inspired and inspiring lives that God’s prepared for all of us.

Be ever watchful for these two unhealthy dynamics to interject themselves into your life. It isn’t the case that any of us will be entirely free from these all-too-human lapses. However, recognize them for what they are. Tricks to throw us off the blessed pathway of sanctification in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

In the concluding verses of his first letter, the apostle Peter warns Christians “Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” There are I believe, two points these verses point out that is germane to our discussion thus far. The first of which being to maintain “an alert and sober mind.” One of the things I can’t help but see quite clearly is that an alert mind is one that is actively engaged in the moment. In some regards, daydreaming stands as an antithesis to being totally present with God, yourself and your fellow humans. Consider this. If you were out camping in an area which required a sentry, would you want that guard ever-watchful of the events transpiring in real time or thinking about what he’d do if he won the lottery?

Nostalgiaism in children is largely absent. To begin with, lacking as many experiences as adults have lends itself to not falling victim to this self-defeating mind loop. Also, children have a much greater ability of remaining in the here-and-now. Have you ever seen a baby playing with his parents’ key ring? Is that child anywhere else in his mind than fully with those keys, twisting them, turning them, hearing them jingle as they spill over to one side?

Sober very clearly is a much bigger term than just remaining sober. Protestant theologian RC Sproul puts his finger best on the meaning of what being sober-minded means. He writes “To be sober-minded, however, is to treat truth seriously and to have a healthy doubt as to our own understanding of truth.” Being sober-minded means being actively aware of what’s going on in the real, objective world versus the means by which we subjectively perceive that world.” My wife frequently has to remind me “Just because I think something is

true, doesn't necessarily mean that it is."

Truer words aren't frequently spoken. Just like you, I exist in two worlds simultaneously. I exist within God's created order and I exist in my own, personal, ongoing interpretation of it. When I choose to place my perception of the world on a higher plane mentally than the world as it actually is, I cede being sober-minded. Here is where a great many people languish in joylessness. Like ostriches, they bury their heads in the sand and choose to avoid reality. The chief means by which this is done is through dwelling in a thought-world of their own, fanciful creation. I've done that for sure. Still do on occasion, if I'm honest about it. The results are not ever what I hope for though. Because the thing is, eventually, that fictitious world is going to be shattered by something. Whether it's a downturn in your health or in the financial markets, living in a highly subjective, fantasy world isn't sustainable.

If you find yourself on a "shadow path" of nostalgiaism or other, it's time to get off. And one of the best ways to do that is to activate your sense of wonder!