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Seismic Shifts

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Contents

Acknowledgments	7
Introduction: The Little Things Do Matter	9
Part 1	
Shifts That Bring Greater Joy Than You Can Imagine	15
1. The Seismic Shift from Infancy to Adulthood	19
2. The Seismic Shift from Doing to Being	31
3. The Seismic Shift from Somberness to Celebration	42
Part 2	
Shifts That Expand Your Faith	55
4. The Seismic Shift from Me to God	59
5. The Seismic Shift from Snacking to Feasting	69
6. The Seismic Shift from Monologue to Dialogue	84
Part 3	
Shifts That Bring Health and Rest	97
7. The Seismic Shift from Rushing to Slowing	101
8. The Seismic Shift from Stuffed to Satisfied	115
9. The Seismic Shift from Anxiety to Peace	130
Part 4	
Shifts That Build Dynamic and Lasting Relationships	141
10. The Seismic Shift from Burning to Building	145
11. The Seismic Shift from Served to Serving	160
12. The Seismic Shift from Flattery to Truth-Telling	172
Part 5	
Shifts That Open the Floodgates of True Riches	183
13. The Seismic Shift from Mine to God's	187
14. The Seismic Shift from Hamsters to Sharers	202
15. The Seismic Shift from Fleeting Wealth to True Wealth	214

6 Table of Contents

Part 6

Shifts That Will Help You Impact Your Community and the World	225
16. The Seismic Shift from Us to Them	229
17. The Seismic Shift from “One Size Fits All” to Your Outreach Style	241
18. The Seismic Shift from Closing the Deal to Making a Journey	253
Conclusion: From Glory to Glory	266
Appendix 1: Weekly Reading Guide	267
Appendix 2: Praying the Lord’s Prayer: Matthew 6:9–13	269
Appendix 3: Daily Health Sheet	271
Appendix 4: The Best News Ever	273
Study Guide	276
Notes	284
Recommended Reading	287

Part 1

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Shifts That Bring Greater Joy Than You Can Imagine

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Does God think we have too much fun? Is he worried that his children are in danger of exploding with joy? C. S. Lewis didn't think so. He believed God has far more joy in store for us than most of us imagine or dream. Lewis writes, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in the slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea. We are far too easily pleased." What Lewis believed is supported over and over again in the Bible.

King David lived in an agricultural setting where a good harvest brought celebration for the whole community. When grain was plentiful and grapes were heavy on the vine, joy was close at hand. Yet David boldly writes, "You have filled my heart with greater joy than when their grain and new wine abound" (Ps. 4:7).

In the very next psalm, David, who had often run to God for protection in hard times, writes, "But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you" (Ps. 5:11).

Throughout his years of following God, David experienced the heights of amazing victories as well as the depths of heartbreak. As a young man, he became a fugitive and was hunted from cave to cave in the wilderness by a mad king who wanted nothing more than to pin him to the wall with a javelin. Later in life, David sat on the throne of Israel, but he was forced to flee from his palace in Jerusalem when his own son Absalom launched a military coup d'état and ousted him. Through all of this, he understood God was, and always would be, his source of joy. Through tears and times of joy, David could boldly declare, "You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy" (Ps. 30:11).

If we turn the clock ahead many centuries, we see an angel appear to a band of shepherds to announce the coming of the long-awaited Messiah. The news of Jesus' birth is characterized as "good news of great joy": "But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people'" (Luke 2:10).

Thirty-three years later, this Messiah had been crucified, had died, and had been placed in a tomb. After three days, Jesus rose from the dead in glory, triumphant over death and the grave. When Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to the tomb, they met a heavenly messenger.

The angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you.”

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. “Greetings,” he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him.

—**Matthew 28:5–9**

Years later, a man named Paul was in jail for preaching about this resurrected Jesus. While incarcerated, Paul wrote to the Christians in the city of Philippi. In his short letter, Paul used various forms of the word joy fourteen times. Even while imprisoned, he understood that overflowing joy was still his because of faith in Jesus. He writes, “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:4–7).

From the Old Testament to the New, the Bible declares this message: in the good and hard times, those who walk closely with God can and should experience life-transforming joy.

Many people would be surprised to discover that the words joy, rejoice, rejoicing, and joyful appear more than three hundred and fifty times in the Bible. A study of these passages makes it clear that the natural condition of a person in relationship with God is joy. Some of these passages talk about people facing a time of joylessness, but it is clear that it is not the natural and ongoing condition of a Christian’s heart.

God is ready to let a river of joy flow into our hearts and lives. But too often we are content with only a sip or a thimbleful. We settle for too little. Maybe C. S. Lewis was right about our being like children content to make mud pies in the slums while God offers us a holiday by the sea.

Could it be that God has more joy in store for us than we ever imagined? Is it possible that God expects his children to live with such a deep

level of celebration that even hard times, loss, struggle, and the pain of this life seem small compared with his supply of joy?

Enough with mud pies and living in the slums of joylessness. It is time for a holiday by the sea!

The Seismic Shift from Infancy to Adulthood

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the head, that is, Christ.

—Ephesians 4:14–15 TNIV

In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity.

—Hebrews 5:12–6:1

Babies are cute. They can do the smallest thing and adults cheer with delight, laugh with joy, and stare in amazement. Think about it, parents actually talk with pride about how their little boy holds his head up or how their little girl smiles on command. They act as if these relatively common activities rival the exploits of great athletes.

grow. We must respond to his invitation and promptings and take action that will result in maturity.

God's dream is to see us taking steps toward him. And when we stumble or fall, God rejoices when we get up and keep trying. He does not promise that we will never struggle, but he longs for us to keep striving as we grow to be more like Jesus.

Some years ago, when our first son was learning to swim, I experienced something I think is similar to what God feels when he watches his children. We had heard of a woman who gave swimming lessons in her back-yard pool. She was legendary in our area because she had never met a child she couldn't teach to swim. She was also a nurse, so we felt safe having her help our son through this challenging learning experience.

With confidence and excitement, we took Zach to his first lesson. After some preliminary greetings and instructions, it was time to get the kids in the pool. Zach ran straight for the fence and locked his fingers in the chain links with white-knuckled fury. He had no intention of getting in the pool and "swimming for Mrs. Rita." He explained to her, as only a terrified little boy can, that he appreciated her offer, but he was going to take a pass on this whole swimming lesson thing. Maybe some other day.

Sherry and I looked on and had to make a decision. We could explain to our little boy that he would have to take this step toward maturity. Or we could pack him in the minivan and drive home. We wanted to see him press through his fear and succeed at swimming, even if it was hard for him. We knew we could not force Zach to swim, but we could give our strongest encouragement for him to try.

After we pried his viselike fingers from the fence, we explained to Zach that we expected him to give his best effort. We assured him we loved him. We promised he would not sink to the bottom of the pool. Then we placed him in Rita's arms and left. To make a long story short, by the end of the week, Zach was jumping off the diving board in the deep end and swimming the full length of the pool. We rejoiced in the growth we saw in our son and were thankful we had pressed him to take this scary step. We were also proud of him for trusting us and growing through his fears.

God looks at us, his beloved children, and rejoices each time we take a baby step forward on our spiritual journey. He is proud when we face our fears or overcome hurdles so we can grow to be more like Jesus. He also experiences sorrow when we won't grow in faith. When we cling to the

chain-link fences of life and refuse to let go, he wants to gently pry our fingers free and remind us that he will be with us and we won't sink to the bottom of the pool. God cheers each time we experience the victory and joy of spiritual growth. He celebrates these steps because he knows we will find lasting joy as we grow up in faith.

What does God dream about? He dreams about you and me! He dreams about our taking steps closer to him. He dreams about our getting up when we fall and trying again, even when we scrape our knees. He dreams about our discovering deep and lasting joy on each step of our journey. He dreams about what we could become if we will simply commit ourselves to the process of moving from spiritual infancy to adulthood.

Rapid or Normal Growth? • • • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

Has it ever struck you that some people seem to experience unusually rapid spiritual growth? They come to a place of authentic faith in Jesus Christ and begin to grow immediately. It is almost as if they are taking spiritual steroids. In a matter of days and weeks, a passion for God blossoms in their lives. Over weeks and months, these new followers of Jesus begin to devour God's Word like a starving person who is invited to an all-you-can-eat buffet for the first time. These relatively new believers naturally find a place to serve in the church, begin to share their resources with those in need, and freely tell others about God's love and how he is changing their lives. At a freakish mutantlike pace, they grow in spiritual maturity so quickly that they pass many who have been Christians for a much longer time.

On the other hand, there are people who believe in Jesus and attend church faithfully, but year after year, they seem to stay the same. They listen to the pastor's sermons, but nothing seems to sink in. They show few signs of spiritual progress. They seem to tread water, staying in the same place month after month, year after year, and even decade after decade. Maybe they experience an occasional moment of spiritual inspiration, but the flame quickly flickers and they resume the familiar posture that has characterized their spiritual lives for so many years.

The question at hand is this: what should normal spiritual growth look like? Should we be surprised and amazed by those who grow rapidly, or should we see this as normal for those who follow Jesus? Is it right to watch people in the church go year after year showing no signs of spiritual growth, and look the other way, pretending this is normal? And here's an even more personal question: if we look at our own spiritual lives and realize we are treading water, what should we do about it?

How do parents feel when they realize their child's growth is stunted? The answer is obvious: they are deeply concerned. If their little boy or girl has a physical problem, they call a doctor. They will go from specialist to specialist and do all they can to help their child overcome this obstacle. If their son or daughter is dealing with an emotional or mental hurdle, they will contact a Christian counselor or a psychologist to get help. Any loving parent who sees something hampering the growth of their child will take action.

Seismic Shifts That Lead Us toward • • • • • • • • • • Spiritual Maturity

One Sunday morning, I was preaching about God's desire to see us grow into mature followers of Jesus. To make the point, I showed a video clip of a dad and mom teaching their little boy to walk. I borrowed a home video from a woman who works in our church office. This sixty-second clip of John and Chrisann teaching their firstborn to walk communicated more clearly than I could have hoped to with mere words.

Little Evan was doing his best to keep his balance, putting both arms straight up in the air. In his white T-shirt and diaper, he took wobbly steps across the kitchen floor until he got to the little mat by the sink. As he stepped on it, the mat shifted ever so slightly, and he lost his footing and dropped to the floor. His mom cheered him on, "Great job, Evan! You're doing great." He struggled to his feet and kept crossing the floor, arms in the air, a look of determination on his face. Then with no warning, he pitched straight forward and fell with a thud to the cold tile floor. The congregation gasped. You could sense that everyone wanted to reach up to the screen and help this little guy back to his feet.

There he was, sprawled with his nose just an inch off the floor, his little butt sticking up in the air. Then his father spoke, "Evan, stand up and walk to Daddy." He lay there, frozen for a moment. Then from somewhere deep inside, Evan found the strength to push himself up, turn around, and begin walking toward his father. The congregation watched, wanting to cheer but absolutely silent. Step by step, he crossed the floor until he fell into his daddy's arms. The response from the congregation was both joy and a huge sigh of relief.

This video clip illustrates something God wants all of us to understand. He looks at us and sees beloved children. When we lose our balance and fall flat, he is right there. He says, "Stand up and walk to Daddy."