

providing a future with hope

Challenger

The Challenger
is a publication
of Life Challenge of
Southeastern Michigan

enlightening empowering equipping

March 2007

HARD HAPPINESS

*“Life is not measured by the amount of breaths you take,
but by the moments that take your breath away.”*

By Jeff Bonzelaar, Executive Director

The quote above came from the cover page of a web site on extreme sports. Extreme sports are those sports which test the limits and go to the edge, the fringes (e. g., skydiving, cliff-jumping, freestyle motor cross, snowboarding). These extreme sports create an adrenal rush in the participant—an ecstasy or euphoria.

An extreme kind of joy.

We are happy-hungry people. We all want in our own way to have our breath taken away. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s part of being human. We long to be caught up in an ocean—as large as we can find—of joy. Extreme sports is one of the ways certain people do this. Granted, the euphoria is only momentary, but it is exhilarating the few minutes it lasts.

In Psalm 32:1-2, David speaks of an extreme joy he and others redeemed were experiencing. And it was not simply a happy-memory of old. It was an on-going possession of the present: *“Blessed is he whose transgres-*

sions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord does not count against him.”

There’s a truth revealed here: There’s nothing sweeter than God’s forgiveness of our sins. To have the punishment we deserve averted and our guilt removed. To have fellowship with God restored. That’s bliss!

*“No man ever
appreciated mercy so
much as him who
understands justice.”*

Here’s the deal, though. No man ever appreciated mercy so much as him who understands justice. In like

manner, you and I appreciate God's gift of forgiveness to the degree we come to grips with the awfulness of our sin and the wrath due us. Good news is good news only as we understand the bad news.

I was tucking my nine-year-old in bed a few weeks ago when things got strangely quiet. I noticed tears welling up in Jordan's eyes. I asked Jordan what was that matter. He informed me that earlier in the day he had said a bad word. He was convicted and felt very sorry for what he had done.

Curious, I asked him what he had said. He told me that he told two classmates of his to "Shut-up!" I nearly fell backwards. I know that telling someone to "Shut-up" isn't the nicest thing to say, but it's not like Jordan cussed somebody out. He didn't say something vulgar. He didn't challenge one of his home-boys to a fight. He just said, "Shut-up." How many times have I said something much worse without thinking twice about it, and here was my son tormented over a couple of vain words he had uttered.

After exhorting Jordan to make things right as soon as he could with the two kids he had wronged, I invited him to confess his sins to Jesus. I will never forget the look of wonder and relief that came upon Jordan's face as he began to experience Christ's forgiveness. He discovered first hand the blessedness of the man whose sins the Lord does not count against him!

*"The sweeter the joy,
the more bitter its core."*

While Jordan's Spirit-quicken conscience brought pain, it also was the seed-bed for an intense joy he later experienced. Without that sorrow, his joy would have been minimal. In fact, the greatest joys in life are always mixed with difficulty, fear, and suffering. This is the paradox: The sweeter the joy, the more bitter its

core. Whether achieving a college diploma, personally completing an addition to the house, getting awarded top sales for the year, . . . all these joys are the product of pain and sacrifice.

For Jordan, the relief he enjoyed upon being told of Christ's forgiveness was in proportion to the grief and contrition he felt over his sin. I call this hard happiness. There's nothing soft or cheap about it. John Piper writes, "The reason many Christians seem to have no thrill at being forgiven through the gospel is that they have not been brokenhearted over their sin."

CONCLUSION

This extreme joy is available to each one of us. It is a joy which is real and lasting. And thankfully, you don't have to jump out of an airplane to experience it.

Pray the prayer of David recorded in Psalm 51: "Create in me a pure heart"—a heart that is tender and properly grieves over sin. We cannot create this, only God can. As He does and we are broken, His salvation becomes all the more precious and meaningful to us. The psalmist put it like this: "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy" (126:5).

*"At the cross, at the cross,
where I first saw the light,
and the burden of my heart rolled away.
It was there by faith, I received my sight,
and now I am happy all the day."*

Testimony

Rene Richardson

"I was born and raised on the south side of Chicago. I attended Catholic school until the eighth grade. I transferred to a public school in the ninth grade and the transition was hard. To fit in, I started hanging

around kids who smoked and drank and joined with them.

When I was sixteen I dropped out of school and began working full-time. I used drugs recreationally on the weekends. I was able to keep things under control.

At twenty years of age I moved in with a man whose brother was a heroin addict. One day my boyfriend was standing in the doorway of our house and someone came up and shot him. His brother suggested he use heroin to control the pain. We both tried it and became addicted.

When my boyfriend could no longer support both of our habits, I turned to selling drugs. I don't remember how many times I was robbed at gunpoint by someone who wanted my drug money, but the constant threats on my life could not make me stop. Because of the shame and humiliation I had brought upon myself, I severed all ties with my family.

After ten long years my brother found me and made me promise to get help. I agreed. A few weeks later he was killed in a fight. I tried to go back on my promise but family members kept reminding me of what I had said. I felt obligated, and agreed to seek help. I entered the Teen Challenge program in Muskegon, Michigan one week later.

I was there for everyone else but me. I gained biblical knowledge, but my heart was not open to life-change. I was too proud.

On my ninth-month pass I broke one of the rules and was dismissed from the program. I sought help at Life Challenge in Detroit in hopes that a change in location would benefit me.

I entered and later completed Life Challenge in 2002. I moved back to Chicago. My mom agreed to let me stay

with her and my stepfather. They had moved out of the inner city and now had a home in the suburbs. I got a job and things went well for a while. I was going to church and family relationships were being restored.

But then I started attending classes at a college located right in the middle of where I used to deal drugs. Old feelings and cravings began to resurface. I gave in and fell quickly into a deep hole.

One day in desperation I cried out to God to save me. He showed me that even though I had confessed Jesus as my Savior, I had not humbled myself and made Him Lord of my life.

In 2005 I re-entered Life Challenge. Everything did not change at once. I had a hard time turning away from my past. I was afraid of totally surrendering to God. But by His grace I slowly began letting go of the things that kept me bound. I began to get hungry for the Word of God. I started to enjoy the classes and chapel where I heard the Scriptures proclaimed. Jesus began revealing Himself and His precious promises to me. I came alive.

I now stand on His promises and depend on Jesus to take me from day to day. I am a new creation in Christ. I thank God for His faithfulness."

P.S. Rene graduated the program in October 2006. She is working part-time and doing an internship in the Women's Division.

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Together for souls,

Jeff